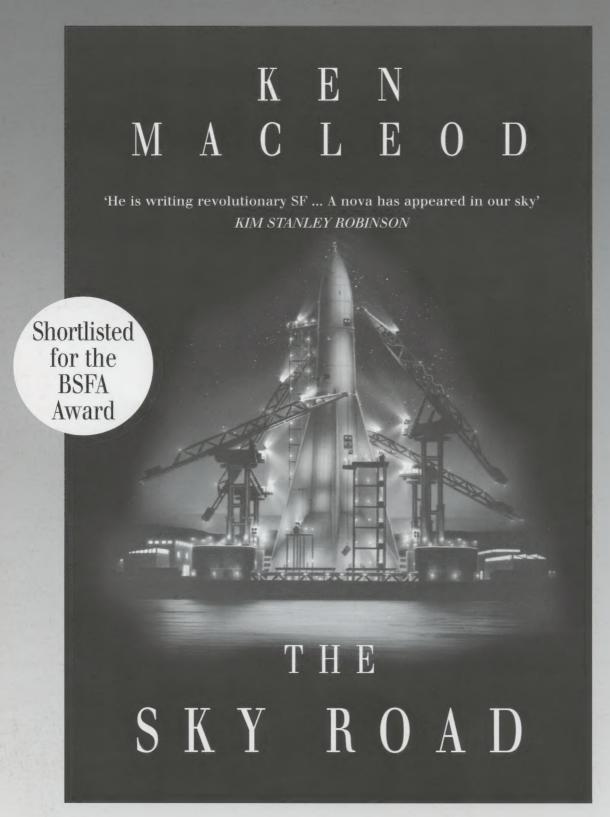


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Andy Cox

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Submissions

Stories, artwork and proposed features are welcome. Please study several issues of the magazine before submitting and always enclose adequate return postage, otherwise we cannot reply. Overseas submissions should be disposable and accompanied by two International Reply Coupons or simply an email address (this option is for overseas submissions only). Always enclose a covering letter and send just one story at a time. There is no restriction on length of stories. Letters and queries are welcome via email but story submissions should be sent via snail mail as manuscripts. No responsibility can be accepted for loss or damage to unsolicited material, howsoever caused

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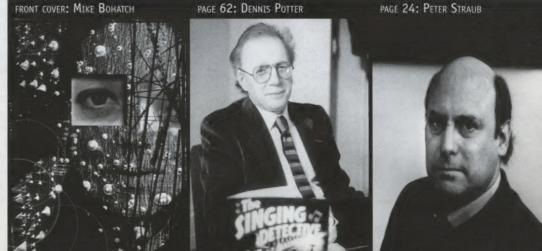
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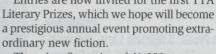
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EDITORIAL



SPECIAL OFFERS





THE THIRD ALTERNATIVE THIS IS TTA23!

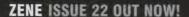
Coming soon we have stories by writers new to TTA, including Charlee Jacob, Nigel Fletcher and Steven E Burt; interviews with Douglas Coupland and Muriel Gray; profiles of Martin Amis, Federico Fellini, Jan Švankmajer...

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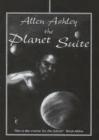
THE PLANET SUITE ALLEN ASHLEY

A tour de force of memory, mythology and astronomy, this audacious book can be read either as a novel or collection of linked short stories. Features 'Seven Rides to Venus' from TTA3, but everything else is original to this unique book: 'Jupiter - and Beyond', 'The Last Martian Artefact', 'The Call of Uranus', 'Mercury Me', 'First World Tour' (featuring Gustav Holst), 'The Saturn Alias', 'Neptune the Mystic' and much more. Years before its time and slammed by certain backward looking sci-fi magazines, the wider audience must now be about ready for this definitive slipstream novel. Get it in its relatively crappy 1996 original edition before it's too late...

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The TTA Literary Prizes

Entries are now invited for the first TTA

There is a first prize of £1,000, a runner up prize of £500 and five second runner up prizes of £100 each. There is no official entry form, and writers may enter as often as they wish provided each individual story is accompanied by an entry fee of £5/US\$8 payable to 'The TTA Literary Prizes'.

Stories will be considered within the categories of sf, horror, fantasy, slipstream and crossgenre fiction. Entries must be no longer than 6,000 words and must be original work in English which has not been previously published in any form. Entries must not be under consideration for any other competitions, under current consideration for publication or currently awaiting publication. Stories must be typed double spaced on single sheets of A4 paper. The title page must carry the entrant's name, address and a contact telephone number and/or email address. The title of the story must appear on each subsequent page, but no other author details must be shown. Pages must be clearly numbered.

Entries should be sent to the Prizes Administrator: Peter Tennant, 9 Henry Cross Close, Shipdham, Thetford, Norfolk IP25 7LQ, England, and must be received by the closing date of 31 December 2000.

A shortlist of stories will be forwarded by the Administrator to an independent panel of judges who will make the final decision. The judging panel will consist of a professional author, a publisher's representative and a literary agent. No stories will be seen by the TTA editorial staff, at least not until after the Prizes are awarded, when an offer of publication may be made at the usual terms.

Details of the winning entries will be announced in the March 2001 issue of The Third Alternative, published on the website and elsewhere. For a complete set of rules send SAE or email to the editorial address.

Subscription Changes

Nobody has opposed my suggestion of extending the subscription period to cover six issues (or twelve, if you prefer), and plenty of subscribers have supported the motion, so the changes are now in effect. The new rates are shown in the usual place. We are always happy to make exceptions on an individual basis, by the way, so if you ever have a problem (with anything to do with TTA) please just get in touch.

Letters

Please continue to send in your letters of comment. We may not always have room in the magazine to print them, but they are always read and acted upon. Please also consider joining TTAlkback, where you can give and receive constant feedback on everything to do with TTA.

The Review

This issue's review section could easily have been four pages longer, so what we've decided to do is continue to print as many reviews as we can here, but post *all* reviews at regular intervals to the website. So, you can read about a lot more novels, collections, anthologies and films just by visiting Shadowlink (www.tta-press.freewire.co. uk). Bookmark the site and return often!

We have a constantly updated list of books received for review, so if you're interested in reviewing any of them, for the magazine or the website or both, the best thing to do is join other subscribers on the TTAlkback email list. Simply send a blank email to ttalkback-subscribe@one list.com and your membership will be confirmed almost immediately.

Stopped the Presses

We recently discovered that some artwork appearing in issues 21 and 22 of TTA contains images taken without permission from the published works of Dave McKean and Joel-Peter Witkin. Work from TTA23 found to contain more samples from Mr McKean and Mr Witkin's work was immediately withdrawn and replaced. I was able to contact Dave McKean immediately and offer him my sincere apologies, and am currently trying to contact Mr Witkin to do the same. I would like to apologise to both artists here also and assure them, and everyone else, that we were unaware of any breach of copyright taking place. We take a very dim view of plagiarism and wish to publish nothing but original work.

Serpent's Tail Offer

You'll see the ad from Serpent's Tail in this issue (and in *Crimewave* 3), offering you some books at a special pre-publication discount. Two of these are the debut novels by longstanding and popular TTA contri-

butors Joel Lane and Chris Kenworthy, both published as part of Serpent's Tail's admirable 'shock of the new' campaign. If you're familiar with their short fiction you won't need any encouragement from me, but to everybody else: buy 'em!

CRIMEWAVE 3

BURNING DOWN THE HOUSE

BRILLIANT NEW STORIES

CHAZ BRENCHLEY • JAMES LOVEGROVE
LEV RAPHAEL • PATRICIA TYRRELL
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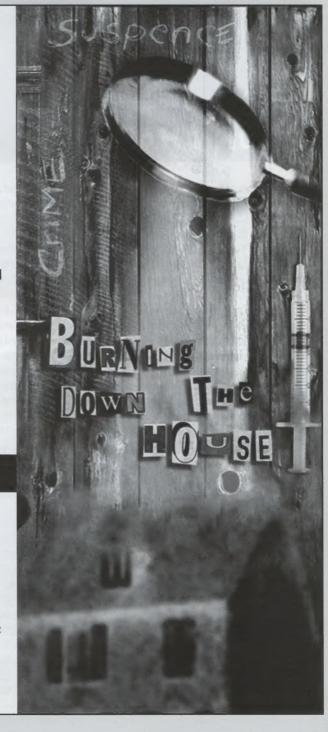
STUNNING ARTWORK

MIKE BOHATCH • DAVID CHECKLEY WENDY DOWN • RODDY WILLIAMS

OUT NOW!

Two out of the three stories shortlisted for the 1999 CWA The Macallan Short Story Dagger were from Crimewave, and Antony Mann's 'Taking Care of Frank' (CW2) was the winner

'Looks great, reads very well indeed' **Peter Guttridge**'Very impressive, brilliant stories' **Blue Murder**'CW goes further, and the quality is high' **The Times**'Excellent' **The Morning Star**





A few months after the death of our teenage daughter, we left her — as we thought — safely buried in St Anne's churchyard, Barnes, and bought a house in Peckham.

"My God," my wife said, the day we moved in.

She wasn't keen. But Peckham suited me. Its main street was full of cheap hardware shops. Fast food wrappers blew about in the sunshine. Driving past the Leisure Centre that first afternoon, we noticed that part of its signboard had fallen off. The next day it had lost the whole of the first E in 'leisure'. Peckham leaned up against the suburb of East Dulwich (where at that time the Prime Minister still lived) like some old bag lady against a West End shop window. Every morning its rich complement of lunatics and failures would begin to make their hesitant way down Rye Lane into Peckham itself to do their shopping. There were halfway housers, psychotics released suddenly into the community with a carrier bag and a strange list to the left, failed old criminals with eyes huddled and blank, fat women in jogging pants and carpet slippers. They shambled and loped, or walked sideways like Martinique land crabs. Shouts were drawn from them inadvertently as their dreams and anxieties ebbed or flowed. They talked to themselves without let.

Down the length of the lane massive horse chestnuts were in blossom, their leaves so densely packed it was evening outside the Jet paper factory at 9AM. The chestnut flowers looked like strange little flickering pagodas of light. They always reminded me of William Blake's 'tree full of angels'. Further down Rye Lane stood the remains of an old hedge made up of holly, hawthorn and elder. It was dusty, broken, full of gaps, full of rubbish from the house behind it. Builders had been working on the house for months, perhaps years. The collapse of the property market towards the end of the Eighties had made them desultory, halfhearted.

When I first went past, its windows were boarded over with panels of cheap blond wood. Across one of them had been scrawled in grey cellulose primer: GIFCO WE ARE HERE. This message began high up on the left of the panel but rapidly lost confidence and toppled away towards the right hand bottom corner, the letters becoming smaller and harder to make out. It had a desperate air and I wondered who had written it. They weren't there any more. The house was silent. Gifco had never arrived. Or perhaps he had. Perhaps, waiting it seemed interminably in the dark behind the boards, they had made some essential mistake about his nature, about his plan and their part in it. Walking past among all the other lunatics I caught the corrupt, sweet scent of hawthorn blossom, and paused fractionally as if I had heard someone call my name.

Later that day a young policeman rang my doorbell. Anxious to do things properly, he showed me his warrant card twice: once on the doorstep and then again inside on the stairs. He was quietly-spoken; dressed in jeans, a thick pullover and oxblood Dr Marten's shoes, not a colour you see much recently. He explained that he wanted to use my second floor balcony to get a view of some houses further down the Rye. That was all right, I said. But would he be comfortable?

Showing me a cheap airline bag, he said, "I could survive for days with what I've got in here."

He didn't seem to have much more than a pale blue nylon rally-jacket and a two-way radio. "Hello?" he said into the radio. "I think I've got an OP." He had a boyish look, an undiminished sense of the excitement of what he was doing. "This'll be great," he said. "Great."

I took him a dining chair to sit on, and a cup of tea. I found that he had camouflaged himself by hanging up two large squares of black plastic material and rearranging some flower pots along the low wall of the balcony. The radio was in front of him. He was grateful for the tea. "It's a real sun-trap out here." he said.

"I love the sun," I told him immediately. "I'm out here a lot."

"If anything exciting happens I'll give you a shout," he promised. He grinned. "Better than watching it on the telly."

After that, things were quiet. From the front room I heard him speak once or twice into the radio.

About half an hour later he went away again for ten minutes, then came back. "Sorry about this," he said, as I let him in. "Something has happened. Not very spectacular, but something." He had another cup of tea, and this time he spent much longer out there. He spoke into his radio. "Control, control from Colin. I've just seen an IC3 climb up some ladders at the back of the house. Control, did you get that? Yes, yes, I can confirm that. No, he's gone up a ladder and through a door at the rear. Wearing a blue jacket: a ski jacket: an IC3." His voice became lively. "Second floor, window on the right. Yes!" he shouted. Then, "To your left, to your left!"

I was excited too. We huddled behind the camouflage plastic, craning our necks to see what was going on. I heard some faint shouts from down in the street. I thought I could see a lightly-built figure running about in a back garden: a child or a teenager: an IC3.

Suddenly I realised the direction I was looking in. I said, "Isn't that the house with the boarded up windows?"

He stared at me. "I wouldn't say anything about that." Later he added, as he put his things one by one back in the airline bag, "After all, you've got to live round here."

The radio fizzed and spluttered to itself from inside the bag. Every so often a woman's voice assembled itself out of this noise, like a child speaking into an empty tin to make itself important. It sounded like "Paul? Paul?"

He zipped the bag shut. "Can I use your loo, please?" he asked. He laughed. "I think I'm going to be busy for the rest of the day and this is going to be my last chance."

"He was nice," I told my wife when she got home.

She wasn't so sure. "It never occurs to you to hold anything back," she said.

That night I had a nightmare, in which, believing I had contracted angina, I visited several doctors. None of them could find anything to explain my symptoms. I became increasingly agitated. Finally I stopped in at a small chemist's shop somewhere in Bethnal Green. There, the pharmacist asked me to kneel in a bath of warm water while he made his examination. At first he could find nothing, "She's been fairly thorough," he said, of the last consultant I had seen. Then he inserted his fingers into my anus and began to pull. Why he would search there for the source of a pain in the heart, I have no idea. In the dream it seemed clear that this was the medicine of the East. Anyway, without much discomfort, out came a rolled-up copy of The Spectator, a journal to which I have contributed the occasional review.

"I swallowed The Spectator?" I said.

I burst out laughing. The pharmacist laughed too. There we were as the dream came to an end, in a shop smelling of coal tar soap and medicated shampoo, roaring with laughter like two naughty boys. But I woke up sweating. It was five o'clock in the morning; my wife was shaking me. Somehow, in the zone of slippage between dreaming and waking, 'spectator' had become 'watcher'. I was full of terror.

Next morning my wife asked, "How do you feel?"

When I was a younger man I was very shy. I was frightened of being sick, having diarrhoea or fainting, especially in front of people. None of those things ever happened. Suppose there was something so deep inside you that you never heard from it, something so intricately woven into your personality that it was hidden, something which had nothing but contempt for you. Suppose one day it spoke quite clearly to you, with

perhaps a shade of an echo, as if it came from a well, and told you in a clever voice that the things you did were shit. Would you want to hear it speak again?

"I feel fine," I told her.

"I hope you do," she said.

"You know what the funny thing is?" I said.

"No."

"The funny thing is that the doctor had Allo Johnnie's voice."

"Who's Allo Johnnie?"

"Don't you remember?"

After that I set up my own OP on the balcony at nights. It was hard to see clearly. But I thought I could make out a constant quiet coming and going at the Gifco house. There were visits and deliveries. Black plastic rubbish bags were manhandled into the garden and perhaps buried. By day, though, it lay hot and deserted behind its hawthorn hedge in the sun. Late one morning curiosity made me push my way through the hedge, prise the hardboard off one of the ground floor windows, and climb inside. The air lay hot and heavy in the corners of the room. After a moment I could feel it in my chest, in my heart, all the lobes of my body. A single thin bar of light fell molten yellow across the concrete floor, revealing shreds of green linoleum, a dusty old three-seat sofa, its threadbare velvet covers faded from maroon to orange. I stood there for some time, lapped in the most perfect silence though the lunchtime traffic was already backing up on Rye Lane, heat shimmering off the bonnets of the little modern cars.

Peckham is always full of temporary bookstalls which appear and disappear in a day — one table pushed up against the window of a hairdresser or furniture shop, with perhaps thirty or forty dog-eared paperbacks on it. They are the result of house clearances: the books of the deceased, the evicted, the permanently hospitalised. That morning I had bought an old novel from one of them. I took it out, and, squatting down in that perfect ray of sun, began to read the first page: 'When I was a tiny boy I often sat motionless in the garden, bathed in sunshine, hands flat on the rough brick of the garden path, waiting with a prolonged, almost painful expectation for whatever would happen, whatever event was contained by that moment, whatever revelation lay dormant in it.'

As I read the word 'revelation' I heard someone come in through the front door. Feet scraped in the hall. I closed the book and stood up.

"I wondered if I'd find you here." It was the policeman, Colin. "When did you begin to work for Gifco?"

We talked for so long that first morning I was late for lunch. When I got home I found a Ford van parked outside the house next to mine. HOUSES CLEARED WAS painted on its side in fake Edwardian script: FURNITURE BOUGHT. An oldish man, very active, with a pink face, grey hair and spectacles, wearing Marks & Spencer's joggers, a cardigan and a neck scarf, was making a pile of the stuff on the pavement while a younger one threw it into the van. The older man laughed and joked a lot.

"Lucky?" I heard him say. "I'm not lucky!"

Cushions off a chair, a wooden ironing board, two black tin boxes about eighteen inches on a side and rusty at the corners; a grey double-breasted jacket and a pink shirt; old aluminium saucepans, plastic supermarket bags stuffed with clothes: everything went in, even the tangle of wire coathangers left behind in the wardrobe. A pair of stepladders was hurled in like a javelin.

Upstairs I found my wife.

"Someone's died next door," she said. She was standing at the window looking down into the street. I could hardly hear her over the sound of the television.

"Perhaps they're just moving," I said.

"If he's just moving, why are they throwing his mattress into the back of the van like that? Look at that sock! If you're moving you don't just drop a sock in the road and leave it there." She rubbed the window with her hand. "Those are someone's things."

Through our wall you could hear the older man run energetically up and down the stairs inside the house, then shout: "Here, catch this!"

"Christ!" my wife said disgustedly.

The pile in the back of the van grew unstable. For a moment it looked as if everything would totter and fall. With an intelligent, attentive expression on his face, shifting his balance like a goalkeeper intent on saving a penalty, the younger man watched it for a moment. But everything settled down again suddenly. He shrugged and walked away.

"They're just taking aim and throwing it in," my wife whispered to herself. "Those are someone's things," she repeated, then: "Can't you switch that fucking TV off?"

"It was you who put it on," I said. "You put it on yourself."

"We'll be next. Don't worry about that. They'll be throwing us in the back of a van next."

In a second, more formal dream of angina, I kept an appointment at King's College Hospital.

In the dream it was night-time. The hospital's bleak annexes straggled down Denmark Hill towards Camberwell in the curious bluish moonlight, buildings like shoeboxes, as shabby, bashed and precarious as the people they were supposed to rescue. From Mental Health to Cardiac, their corridors were all the same: stale cream glazed with dirt: cobwebs high up. At Cardiac Reception I counted the plastic chairs. There were fourteen, arranged in four rows on the faded blue lino. SOMETIMES, advised the poster above them, AN ACCIDENT AT WORK IS NO ACCIDENT. The rest of the furniture consisted of some white cupboards with curious sloping tops; a filing cabinet labelled 'Liver Clinic'. Long ago, the room had been part of a children's department. Blue and green tiles told the story of Jack and Jill. Beneath them, the receptionist whispered, "Yes?"

"The Nine Stations of the ECG."

"Pardon?"

"One dab of gel at each wrist, one at each ankle; five beneath the heart," I explained. "It's the heart that counts." Too late now I saw that the Jack and Jill story had been compressed into just two lobes, 'Jack and Jill went up the hill' being followed instantly by 'Jack and Jill fell down the hill'. Act and consequence. The heart of events.

"It's hardly a matter of that," the receptionist tried to explain. She could not find my file. Suddenly she raised her head and called: "Mr Petorni?"

The waiting patients shifted uncomfortably in their seats. No Mr Petorni here.

"Doris Mullins? Doris Mullins?"

"No Doris Mullins here," said a very old man, neatly dressed in tweed jacket and polished brown shoes, looking up briefly from Aspects of Antiquity in the Penguin edition. The rest of the patients — three women, twelve men — sat staring ahead with their arms folded or their hands in their laps. They looked used up, at the end of things. Yet among them sat one younger man, whose remaining hair was combed from left to right across his bald head. Whose blue sta-prest trousers covered his foreshortened thighs, on which rested hands abbreviated by fat, with signet rings. Whose soft leather jacket was zipped reverently over his fat little belly. Whose feet were clasped by oxblood shoes with a brogue detail. Like the shoes, his

face was heavier at the bottom, thickening out and concentrating in the area of the neck. Deep lines slanted from the nose to the ends of the downturned mouth, so that lips, lines, eyebags, fat cheeks and all seemed to drape over the chin in a sequence of inverted V-shapes suspended from somewhere near his prominent ears. It was an extraordinary engineering solution, which gave him an expression of permanent dissatisfaction and anger. At the same time fear and genuine puzzlement made him look boyish and sad, and you saw that his lips had once been rather full and well-shaped.

"Colin!" I cried. "Good to see you."

Instantly, he opened this mouth and said, "These people might be your mum and dad before they died. They haven't had much to do with hospitals. They haven't been out much except to the shops. They haven't had much in their lives at all. Now they find themselves on the edge of a transformation so great they have to sit down to face it. It is as full of vertigo as sin or birth or marriage; or their first job as a railway electrician. They fluff up like sparrows on these plastic chairs here at the cardiac clinic, looking around passively and yet with suspicion. They suppose they'll have to wait. Their heads go up at every name called, every new arrival at reception. Weak sympathies cross their faces. Then they go back to working out their place in the queue."

"Colin!" I called. "Don't you remember me?"

"You have slaughtered your child."

He became a baby, asleep across its mother's knees, hands held in lax fists each side of its lolling unsupported head. Nauseated, I looked down at my own feet. They were bare and gnarled, the feet of a very old man, yellowed, dirty and covered with veins as thick as the cables that run in the tunnels alongside the Underground trains. Between them, on the dusty, dented wooden floor, lay two Polaroid photographs. I reached down to pick these up, my hand becoming huge in my own sight, pink, magnificently-lined, and with the clarity of a thing seen through optical plastic.

"Mr Hamilton?

"Thomas Daley, please!

"Mr Marchant?"

The patients conferred.

"Did she say Markham?"

"Merchant. I think it was Merchant."

"Or was it Martin?"

"Mr Marchant? Mr Marchant? Mr Marchant?"

This dream took place, as far as I can establish, at about 2:15 in the morning. As soon as I woke up from it I phoned Colin. Forty-five minutes later he turned up at the Gifco house, where he undid his coat nervously, gawping like a tourist at the rows of books I had arranged around the skirting boards.

"Where we going?" he said.

Gifco had told him nothing. I showed him the two Polaroids I had been provided with. "You were in my dream," I said, while he was examining them. "You didn't look well. We're going to St Anne's church-yard."

"Where's that?"

"Barnes," I told him. I said, "Gifco wants us to check something."

"Fetch something?"

"Check something," I corrected him. But immediately I began to wonder.

"I'm ready if you are," said Colin.

On Rye Lane we got a minicab. The night was like oil, moving slowly down pipes. Camberwell, visually simplified by its own streetlights, gave way to the brutal sloping ramps of the Elephant. Each time I looked into the back of another

car, a single passenger was looking out at me, warm and comfortable yet white faced and uneasy.

"Where you want to go?" the driver asked eventually, with a kind of neutral exasperation.

"I'll tell you when we get there," I said.

"Look at that," said Colin suddenly. "BMW 850i. Nice car." Then: "Wow! Houses of Parliament!"

Half an hour later he was running about in St Anne's graveyard in the dark. He ran with a strange, gliding gait, his head thrown back and his toes pointed. His breath steamed out in the cold air. He was pleased with himself. He had told the cab driver, "We're not fucking paying that, mate."

The moon cast the pale but definite shadows of trees across the bulk of the church. There were dead leaves scattered on the grass. Flowers in cellophane decorated a new grave. Many of the gravestones — whose unreadable inscriptions all seemed to face away from me — were engraved with pictures: a tall arched window, with a ray of light striking through it on to an altar; stairs, rising to a rising sun, and the words 'Adele Junck'; an angel, with its head bowed and one hand offered to the spectator, palm outwards, as if to bar the way. I sat down companionably at the grave of Adele Junck, a woman who had died early of some dysmenorrhoeic condition now easily remedied. If anyone could understand me it would be Adele.

I said, "My name is Jack, and I am fifty years old. I was once a political commentator and literary critic. I was once a person. Once I had a daughter, with hair as red as your own (though her complexion was never so pale). We called her Sofia, because when she was a baby her eyes were direct enough to damage you if you looked into them without using a mirror. She grew up and went to school and at thirteen years began to listen to music which left me puzzled, cold and angry all at the same time. I loved her dearly for that, too. Now where the fuck is she? Tell me that." I began to cry.

"Here!" called Colin, his voice moving about erratically behind me in the darkness, like a voice from a broken stereo. He was trying to draw my attention to a grave decorated with brand new white chippings. "Has it snowed, or what?" He laughed uneasily. "I thought this was snow!" he said.

Was that the moment I began to dig? Or was I already digging by then, forcing my stiffened fingers hurriedly into the dry fibrous earth like garden forks? I don't know. Was I digging at all? I have to say that I believe I was: I was scraping like a dog. I could hear myself panting and whimpering, off in some faraway night. Eventually Colin moved away, and everything was silent. When I looked up again, the stone ivy on the graves was sculptured perfectly by the moonlight. Moonlight slicked off it like the light on the polished leaves of house plants. Do we build big, ornamental walls round cemeteries just to keep the dead in? Is it that simple, after all?

I did dig. But it was Colin who beat up the cab driver.

After I got home I lay awake the rest of the night. My wife turned restlessly beside me. "Can't you keep still?" she asked me.

"I'm going to make a cup of tea."

"Don't use all the bloody milk."

The next morning I made my way reluctantly to the Gifco house. Whatever I had expected, I found neither Colin nor the girl. The room we used was dark and empty except for its rows of books. Over the weeks, heat and humidity had piled up into it until the air seemed saturated and heavy, hard to breathe, on the verge of being something other than air. It had a distinctive odour. But above that I could smell something else. Perfume. Sweat. Some sharp bodily smell which made

me shiver with the ghost of old anticipation. One ray of light lanced across the centre of the floor, where it found among the blackened flakes of linoleum two Polaroid photographs. I picked them up. One was of a girl. It was of a daughter. In it she was shown sprawled, legs apart, in one corner of the room. She was naked but for a pair of white briefs designed for someone twice her age, with lace detail and legs cut very high to accentuate the pubic mound. Her ribcage and immature nipples stood out in the forty-watt light. Shadows pooled in the hollow of her collar bone. A musing, inturned expression was on her face; but you could almost hear her laughing inappropriately at something an adult had said.

The other picture was of a woman who bore a strong resemblance to my wife. She wore a long pink satin slip, and her hair was disordered. Her expression was hard to read. I remembered how my wife had said to me some time after the death of our daughter, "Why don't we fuck any more?" And then: "Oh for God's sake, it doesn't matter."

I waited for Colin, but he didn't come. Halfway through the afternoon I left the house and walked back up Rye Lane. Women were toiling up the hill in the hot sunshine, laden with plastic supermarket bags. "I think David's going to let me buy that clock," I heard one of them say. "You know, that hippo clock. Because he was having a look at it in the Argos catalogue."

When I got home, my wife had gone. I went through each room, calling, "Jill? Jill?" The bedroom was in a mess, the curtains half-drawn, make-up and underclothes pulled out of drawers and strewn over the carpets. There were signs of a struggle, but not necessarily with someone else. The bath was full of hot water, the bathroom full of steam. It smelled strongly of rose bath-oil, which she loved. In the condensation on the bathroom mirror she had written, making careful, reversed capitals, so that it could be read from outside: GIFCO LEAVE US ALONE. The door to the balcony was open.

The first time I ever saw my wife, whose name is Jill, was in late 1989, in the breakfast room of a hotel in Los Cristianos, Tenerife. She was trying to order a boiled egg. The waiter, a Portuguese, seemed not to understand some distinction she was trying to make. As she began to explain to him, "The way I normally do them at home — " the man sitting next to her interrupted tiredly: "Why not just ask him for a soft-boiled egg?"

"A soft-boiled egg," the waiter repeated in a relieved voice, and left the breakfast room instantly in case things became complicated again. She stared after him in a vague way, then at her companion. You could hear her thinking, "I didn't really mean that. That wasn't really what I meant at all."

Suddenly she said in a low but distinct voice, "Why don't you fuck off, Jeremy?"

He stared at her.

"Just fuck off."

"Well, look, I'm sorry."

She didn't answer.

"Look, I honestly thought that's what you meant. A soft boiled egg."

After a moment she snatched the paper out of his hands and began to read it. When the egg came it remained in front of her, cooling and unopened.

It was my first morning in the Hotel Mirador. I had arrived the previous evening by air from England, and then, ambushed by the situation in Europe, spent all night watching satellite news footage of East Berliners pouring into West Berlin. At five in the morning I had finished an article I was writing with the words: 'When you see East Germans staring entranced into the jewellers' shops and restaurants of the West, the illusion is complete. Late 1989: the poor children of Europe have come to the windows and are yearning for the toys. Eventually, I suppose, they will look through windows in Huddersfield or the valleys of South Wales, and discover only other poor children staring out.'

After breakfast I went out to buy some sun tan oil. The air was still cool, but you could feel the heat building up. The sea crackled with light. The sky was already violet and harsh, just like the sky in the bad paintings outside the seafront cafes. I stopped to rub the oil into my face, arms and legs, then walked along the beach in the opposite direction to Playa de las Americas, until I found a cove with some low volcanic rocks, a promontory from which I could look back up at the town. There were lizards everywhere on the rocks and among the prickly pear, basking in the sun. Some of them were four or five inches long. I felt relaxed and excited at the same time, as if anything could happen. After half an hour, when nothing had, I made my way across some waste land, up through the self-catering apartments at Tenerife Sur and thence to the swimming pool of the Hotel Mirador, where the sun was falling vertically on the pink terracotta surround, silvering the tiles with heat.

The shouts, squeals and laughter of the children echoed back off the stacked balconies above, while the adults lay as stunned as lizards under the orange and green beach umbrellas in a light so hard you had to squint even through your sunglasses: ancient Germans massaging their lost or sagging flesh; young Frenchwomen with muscles like wires on parchedlooking emaciated legs; salesmen from Droitwich or Gravesend, reddened bellies hanging over their extraordinary 'surf' shorts. Among them, not far from the pool itself, I spotted the couple from the breakfast room.

She had not forgiven him, but lay turned away on her side, with her hair hanging over the edge of the sunbed. Her hand rested on the tiles, next to an open paperback book, a novel by Isabel Allende. He was pretending to read The Daily Mail, wincing at the bedlam of the children. As I watched, he reached over her and brushed her skin very lightly with the back of his fingers, just where it tightened between her prominent pelvic bones. She rolled away from him immediately, got to her feet and went towards the swimming pool. "I'm not having a month of this," I thought I heard him say. For a moment she stared straight at me. Then her eyes went blank, and she



walked past and jumped into the pool.

Two Spanish boys began to ride a hired motor-scooter up and down the hotel steps.

At eight o'clock that evening the pedestrianised streets around Baranquillo and the Valle Menendez were suddenly suffused with people in new clothes. Attracted by the dreamy sound of guitar music and smell of seafood on the soft warm evening air, the holidaymakers were leaving their hotels and drifting slowly downhill past shop windows full of silk underwear, ethnic leather and electrical goods, toward the Los Cristianos beachfront. There in the dusk they found a wind from Africa blowing sand across the cafe tables. Children, their energy undiminished — though their cries had become soft and chirruping, made thoughtful by the night and their sense of the Atlantic stretching away west to nowhere jumped up and down on the beach trampolines in the twilight. It was the month before Christmas, and the plaza muzak, barely a whisper, followed 'Silent Night' with a reggae version of 'Jingle Bells'. Say what you like, all this had a kind of rough magic, orchestrated by waiters, street musicians and trinket salesmen who made their way from table to table.

"Allo Johnnie, what you like? You like this? No problem, nice price." And then, sung out as if to a dawdling child: "Come on, Johnnie!"

The voice belonged to a tall West African in a steel blue shirt. All afternoon I had watched him with amusement as he loped unassuagedly up and down the seafront with his goods wrapped like a glamorous encrustation round one fist. His energy was extraordinary, his insincerity grotesque. He offered bracelets plated with nine carat gold, Spanish chokers made of jet beads, phoney Cartier watches and little flasks of a perfume which had never breathed the breath of Chanel: his goods made a kind of gauntlet, a gilded prosthetic, of his forearm. He had disappeared during the empty hour between afternoon and evening, when the wind drove the dogs about the plaza in silent packs and the waiters dragged the cafe tables about in a kind of suppressed, meaningless rage. Now he was plying the outdoor tables of the beach cafes, his teeth white in the twilight and a curious sense of urgency in every movement of his body.

"2,000? OK? Nice price, no problem. OK, come on Johnnie."

A German couple, eating goat and heavily-salted Canary potatoes two or three tables in front of me at the Cafe Amarillas, tried for a while to bargain him down to 1,000 pesetas. Then, after he had said something in a low voice to the woman, paid their bill abruptly and walked away.

He said quietly, "Fuck off then," spun on his heel and began again with someone else: "Allo Johnnie! Allo Johnnie!"

This emerged in such a sweet childish voice its hypocrisy sent a shiver of fear through you.

"Look, old son," I heard his new mark say, in a voice I recognised, "we're just not interested." It was fat Jeremy, from the Hotel Mirador.

"How you know, Johnnie? How you know until you know?" Suddenly, Jeremy pushed his chair back and got to his feet. "Because I'm bloody psychic, Johnnie," he said. And then more quietly, "Because this stuff is crap, that's all." He looked away from Allo Johnnie and down at the woman. For a moment it was as if he had never seen her before. He looked lost. Then a flicker of bemused recognition seemed to go over his face: I had the feeling he was remembering a whole life, element by painful element. "I'd rather eat at a bloody Harvester in Gravesend," he told her, "than in this shit heap." And he walked off.

She waited until he had got ten yards away and called after him quietly, "I know you would."

He came back to their table. "Are you coming?"

"No."

"You can fuck off then," he shouted. He bent over the table, leaned his weight on it so that the unused cutlery slid towards him, and put his face close to hers. I often ask myself if that man was me; if my behaviour to that date had really been any different to that man's. Do you know what I mean? He leaned harder on the table, so that everything spilled off it, and shouted: "It's your turn to fuck off now."

Quite suddenly she began to cry.

Later, she came over to my table and leaned on it the way he had leant on theirs, body bent forward from the waist, arms spread wide. The effect of this was aggressively sexual. At the same time, it made her seem vulnerable: her long breasts, a little reddened by the sun, fell towards me against the thin Indian cotton of her blouse; her shoulders and inner elbows shook faintly with the physical effort of supporting her. I had a sensation of thin cotton touching my skin, a fore-taste of that envelope of warmth so hard to separate from someone's odour, as if I had already brought my face close to her breasts. I smelled sweat, wine, apres sun. She laughed, looking over my head at something behind me; a waiter, perhaps.

"I've seen you watching me."

"[— "

"Don't think," she said, pulling a chair out unsteadily and dropping into it, "I give a fuck — "

"Would you like to sit down?"

"- because I don't."

"Have some wine."

"I don't give a fuck about anything, especially that fucker," she said.

"I'm sure you don't," I said.

"Just tell me one thing, yes or no," she said. "Do you come from Colchester? If not, let's go back to the hotel."

Once this had been understood there was no need to hurry. The waiters fussed around us. The children quietened. The warm air licked the backs of our hands, moved off into the palm fronds. Eventually, we moved off too. In some alley on the way back to the Mirador we heard a cicada. Drawn by the volume of its extraordinary mechanical call, we stood in the soft rosy daylight of a single halogen lamp.

"It's there!" she said excitedly. "There, on the floor!"

By then she had to hang on to my upper arm to stay on her feet. Later, crouching over me in the hot darkness, she rallied — pushing me into her, moving strongly up and down, groaning and panting until she came. But one come was only the beginning for her. Instead of falling forward on to me and going to sleep — so that my cock detumesced and slowly fell out of her and the juices ran out to cool and dry between my pubic hair and hers — she set her face and kept moving up and down, grinding her pubic bone into mine, staring ahead with her eyes blank and preoccupied, until the spasm began again. It was as if I wasn't there. When I came too, and lost my erection, she pulled herself off me with an urgent groan and whispered, "Lick me. Lick me. No. Put your fingers in. Quick! Something! Something!"

She seemed trapped inside herself. Orgasm was easy, but it was all empty space in which nothing ever happened to relieve her. The loneliness of her desire made me feel guilty.

"What about Jeremy?" I asked her.

"Who's Jeremy?" she said; and, "Let him bugger off." So for the rest of the week we lived in my little suite on the fifth floor, directly under the great sign which says 'Hotel Mirador'. We were so happy. We drove up to Teide and trudged about on the edges of the permanent snow. We visited the basilica at Candelaria and the Dragon Tree gardens at Icod de los

Vinos; we caught the ferry over to La Gomera and walked about for an afternoon in the stunning heat of the laurel forests. We took a camel ride, up through the banana trees, with their greasy trunks like large badly-wrapped cigars, and out on to the blasted, cindery landscape south of Los Cristianos. The camels wore a kind of wire-netting muzzle. It was easy to get used to their rocking gait, the squeak of the saddle, the warm sandy smell of the animal itself.

"Look, Out there. Another island!"

We went everywhere. Everywhere we went, Allo Johnnie got there first. His lean, energetic figure rippled towards us in the coastal mirage. The trade winds flapped the short carefully pressed sleeves of his steel blue shirt. He welcomed us down off the ferry, the bus, the camel's back. He offered up his arm, prosthetised with goods, and from it we selected an 'antique' jet necklace, two fake sapphires, a fake Rolex with an expanding metal band. Back at the Hotel Mirador, Jill wrapped her own arm with fake things and offered it to me. We laughed. At the end of the day she lay prone on the soft hushed coastal rocks, upper body raised from the waist in the purple light. "What you like?" she whispered, looking back at me over her shoulder: "Eh?"

In those days she was always so easy to enter. I could slip into her from the most awkward angles.

We took the bus to Adeje, Jill and I. Was that the mistake? We took the tourist bus to Adeje and then toiled up the steep, shady little mainstreet, past the Iglesia de Santa Ursula. Up the hill we went, and out, blinking, into the sudden glare, the gaping mouth, of the Barranco del Infierno. There we stopped to gather our breath. Above us stretched the great rock walls, pitted, flaky, resonant with heat. At the mouth they seemed to be miles apart. A great gap of air lay between them like a block of transparent plastic, encasing parched creep-terraces crusted with valo and prickly pear. You could imagine it flowing, glassy, slow and invincible, down the cindery slopes towards the sea. In the opposite direction, the walls leaned in on one another, the high stony path plunged into shadow, the Barranco choked down to a dark cool slit.

"Look!"

There, on a little promontory, steel-coloured shirtsleeves fluttering in the hot wind, stood a single figure.

"It's Allo Johnnie!"

We ran towards him, hand in hand.

"Johnnie! Johnnie!"

"Is he waiting for us?"

If he was, he showed no sign. When we got there, his face was turned away, his expression perfectly blank and hard. He was so still he might have been carved from the same rock as the Barranco. He stared out across the mouth of the gorge, at the town below, or the sea beyond that, or the white ship on the sea. He was staring out into the plastic air, out into nothing at all, and his eyes were wide and empty. Hanging by his side, his prosthetised arm looked as if he had loosely wrapped it in lizards. (They were alive but asleep; it looked too heavy to raise.) His face was varnished with sweat, but that did not make him seem any more human. When we saw this we slowed to a walk. We were reluctant to approach him. We didn't know how to behave. We called:

"What you got for us, Johnnie?"

"What you got for us today?"

After a moment, when we realised that he wasn't going to answer, we stopped and stared at one another like children who begin to panic in the face of the parent's silence. We looked around but we were alone with him. I whispered, "What are we going to do?"

Jill took my arm. "Come on."

"We can't just walk past him."

"We can."

We squeezed by on the narrow stony path, trying to make a joke of it. But he ignored us, and in the end we went up silently into the Barranco, and by the time we returned he was gone.

That night, the weather broke, and it poured with rain. I heard nothing, I was too busy. I found myself ten years old, forced to collect rents for a gangster in Chicago. In Chicago each street was seven miles long, with ramshackle housing, small businesses and empty bars at one end and upscale suburbs at the other — there was a lens of banks, office buildings and department stores between. I entered one of these streets I didn't know where, to find it suffused with a kind of vile slippery darkness and a smell of diarrhoea. The buildings were unnumbered. To collect the downscale rents, the low number rents, should I turn right or left? How was I to know? I was a little boy again. It was so important to be right that the little boy couldn't make up his mind. He should have finished an hour ago, and he had barely started. Increasingly panicked, unable to move more than a block or two from his original position without changing his mind, he began to see, in bleak flashes of light, the gangster himself, holding court on the cold Chicago pavement outside a tailor's, a barber's, a cafe, as he waited for the rents. I turned my face away, pretending to consult the sheet of paper on which he had written the orders. Up the hill or down the hill? He watched with contempt. He knew we were in the high numbers. He knew it would take hours to get where I was supposed to be. Impossible to fool, he had recognised the hot, comforting smell of a wet bed. I woke in the certain knowledge that somehow, in the zone of slippage between dreaming and waking, 'rents' had become 'tears'. Tears were flowing down my cheeks.

Half past ten the next morning, lights were still burning behind the tinted glass of the Tenerife Sur apartments. The maid service was in over there, hanging carpets on the balcony rails in the rain, while the guests stared morosely out at the wet tiles and ruffled water of the swimming pools, the slick palm fronds whipping to and fro in the wind. The woman at the window — she wasn't my wife then — said impatiently, "It looks like Southend."

The dream still shifted and turned inside my head, as nauseating as a chrysalis turning on its thread.

"I'm sorry?"

"It looks just like bloody Southend," she said. "Southend will follow you wherever you go." Suddenly she shivered. She turned away from the window and said, "I touched his arm. It was damp, but like stone."

Was that the mistake? That we climbed the hill at Adeje and saw Allo Johnnie there and Jill touched his arm? If that was our mistake we soon forgot it.

I won't forget the warm, gritty, evening wind of Los Cristianos. Palm trees with short bulbous trunks the shape of pineapples waved their fronds in it like nervous, landlocked seanemones. Nothing in the air tonight, they whispered. Nothing on this wind. But when you heard it, fluting in the halyards of the yachts moored across the bay, it made you think. It made me think, anyway. Our last evening in Tenerife, Jill looked out over the beachfront and said, "I don't want to leave. I wish we could stay here forever." Sand trickled across the cafe tables, the children chirruped from the beach trampolines, 'Silent Night' enfolded each dining couple in wings of tacky magic. Allo Johnnie made his rounds in the half-dark,

and soon he stood in front of us.

"Allo Johnnie!"

"Hello."

"You take me back with you, England, eh?"

"How did you know we were going?"

He looked away into the distance, as if he could already see Peckham Rye, and laughed softly. For a moment we were back at the mouth of the Barranco, the three of us. For a moment there was a kind of heartbeat discontinuity. In it, Allo Johnnie made some kind of unstated, inexplicable offer. He made a gesture with his laden, glittering arm, a gesture of recognition, as if he was recognising us at last. He handed us his card, a scrap of white pasteboard glimmering brighter than a fake Cartier watch, on which we read, 'Gift Company of Los Cristianos', in an old-fashioned script.

"Gifts," he said. "Eh, Johnnie?"

We laughed, and tried to hand it back. He refused it with a grave smile.

"What you like Johnnie? You like this? I go home with you!" Then sand came up like a fog from the beach and when I next looked he was gone.

I studied the card. 'Gift Company', I read. What had he offered us? I only knew it was unsuitable and wrong. But sometimes, now, when I look through the notebook in which I wrote all this down, and the dust in its creases — dust blown from mainland Africa to make a beach in the Atlantic Ocean — I wish we had accepted.

Again, perhaps we did accept. This is how Tenerife makes you feel. As if there was some residue, some basically insoluble mystery behind or beneath or in some way prior to the rubbishy white hotels, beach bars and endless Cambios. As if even Playa de las Americas, one of the trashiest places on earth, had some secret nothing to do with cheap stereos, expensive leather goods and English beer. You can sense it where a brand new road runs out suddenly in builders' waste and prickly pear; or at the top of a low hill, in some unfinished concrete building that looks like a multistorey car park; or in the amused eyes of the stray dogs of the seafront.

'Gift Company', we read.

Perhaps we did accept.

After we returned from Tenerife we moved in together. For perhaps a month I kept clementines in a bowl I had brought back with me. Bright orange against its lively red and green glazes, they reminded me of the light in Los Cristianos, how it would fall on to the balcony in the mornings while you ate breakfast in a pair of shorts or a swimsuit. But by February I had got out of the habit, and in subsequent Februaries there was our marriage, and the birth of our daughter, and her death, and neither of us thought of Allo Johnnie even when we took out the photographs of that holiday.

After I had found the message from my wife — GIFCO LEAVE US ALONE — I stood in the bathroom for what seemed a long time, wondering what to do. Beneath the smells of bath oil and spilled talcum powder, I detected something more personal: a smell of feet, perhaps, or menstruation, personal, but not necessarily unpleasant because of that. My wife had left her Wilkinson Lady Protector, its shiny blades clotted with soap and tiny hairs, on the edge of the bath. She had left the soap wet, as she often does, so that it dripped a slimy liquor into the bottom of the soap-tray. I went out onto the balcony, from which I could look over to where the Gifco house lay silent and empty in the Peckham sunshine.

GIFCO WE ARE HERE.

I found her there a few minutes later. She was lying awkwardly, half on and half off the sofa, masturbating. It was hot in the house, and the air was thick: a bar of incandescent light fell across her white legs. She had turned on to her stomach then half slipped off the sofa, so that one knee was resting on the floor. She was pulling herself up and down against the worn orange dralon, panting and hissing and whispering to herself, "Come. Come! Oh Christ, come!" Her skirt was up round her waist. The room stank of her. As I stood in the doorway watching quietly, she let go of the sofaarm with one hand and, reaching down behind her, tried to pull her knickers off. The elastic got stuck over her hips. After a moment she stopped trying, and her hand reached around underneath her instead.

At first I thought Colin, who was sitting on the floor in the corner, with his back against the wall and his legs straight out in front of him, was watching her. Then I saw that his drill trousers were stiff with blood, brown blood. He was sitting still in a pool of it, holding himself in with one hand, and on his face was fixed an amused expression, quizzical and appreciative at the same time, an expression a little too mature for the Colin I knew. Flies buzzed round him. The traffic droned to and fro outside. I stood in the doorway. My wife grunted and masturbated in the bright light. Colin seemed to watch her. A third party in the room seemed to be watching them both.

People are so frail, wherever in the world they come from. Many of the inhabitants of Barnes, for instance, believe that if you carry a hen's egg about in your armpit for the whole of Lent, it hatches on Easter Morning. Out jumps a naked, deformed human being somewhat less than five inches tall — I imagine it looking a little like Popeye the Sailor — which for the rest of its short, deteriorating existence serves without question the first person it saw when the light pierced its shell. The people who believe this wear classic Guernsey sweaters and drive Volvo 850T estate cars. During the day they go to work on the administrative side of media. But in the evening after dinner — which they often call 'supper' — they tell each other how they have seen a man poisoned with curls of dried wood shaved from a stick thrust into a grave at Putney Cemetery.

"The idea is, I think, that the stick must puncture the chest wall of the corpse."

"I mean, do you pull it straight out?"

"Oh no, I think it has to stay there a month before it's any good."

"Extraordinary."

"It is extraordinary, isn't it?"

In Barnes when I lived there, nobody would believe anyone else was dead until they actually saw the corpse. This meant that their grandmother's husk had to be kept for some time until every relative had — there is no reasonable way to put this - born witness to its emptiness. The corpse would be arranged in a crouching position in a hole under the living room floor, which was closed with loose floorboards and covered with a woollen Berber from Heal's. Only when the whole family, some arriving over the next day or two from as far away as Reigate or Littlehampton, had seen the evidence — the clenched arthritic fist held up to the mouth, the teeth curled back, the old skin like leather — could the poor old thing be buried properly. Someone who died a long way away might still be regarded as alive until their entire family had itself died out. In Barnes they simply couldn't accept death as an abstract idea.

The night of my daughter's funeral, the long cemetery by the river was illuminated by thousands of candles. Some were little more than cheap night lights; others tall, expensive, perfumed. They were collected in apparently random basins of attraction, a hundred candles burning on some graves, only two or three on others. Rich or poor, it seemed to make no difference. It was the vigil called in Barnes 'the Day of the Dead'. The families clustered round the graves were waiting on the mysterious dividing line between All Saints and All Souls. The great white candles filled the air with sweet scents of rose and beeswax. The children laughed softly and chased one another down the paths between the graves, while their elders sat on the grass opening bottles of Chablis they had got from the Wine Rack on Upper Richmond Road. The effect was of Glyndbourne, but with less tension perhaps, less need to shine. In Barnes, on the Day of the Dead, you are less on show than you would be at Glyndbourne. Your only purpose is to keep the dead company until dawn.

I walked home from the Gifco house and let the water out of the bath. I wiped the condensation off the bathroom windows and vacuumed up the spilt talcum powder; while I was doing that, I thought, I might as well vacuum the living room. My wife returned about two hours later. She never said anything about what had happened, then or later: though I noticed after some months that all the photographs of our daughter were missing. We didn't discuss this, or even refer to it, and for our next holiday chose the island of Jersey.

It was a bleak April there, where you might expect spring to be early, with rain and high winds blustering and banging at the dusty granite clifftops. Nevertheless, girls and young women — daughters — were allowing themselves to be led through the streets of St Helier, first two fingers of the right hand linked to the first two fingers of the left of boys with downy brown moustaches. These couples had a hypnotised air despite the cold. Their white trainers and pristine blue windbreakers, box fresh and perhaps — who knows — never worn again, brought a quality of freshness to their flesh too, making it seem plump, unblemished, just-unwrapped, nice.

"I wonder how they'll cope," said Jill. "I just wonder how they'll cope."

Tired of shopping, suddenly unable to distinguish between the scream of the herring gull and the squeal of the revolving postcard stand, we rented a small red saloon and from the car park of the Hotel de France went inland, up the little tight wooded valleys and into the rural hinterland where the money is farmed. We looked out from the north coast and then the south: grey sea, breaking waves, a misty rain driven in like vapour. We visited the German Hospital. We went to the zoo. Even at forty miles an hour, you can drive all the way round the island in a morning. Just outside St Helier, on the way to Three Mile Beach, we passed an abandoned petrol station. It had been designed to fit between some flaking white houses, all curves and balconies in a kind of Bauhaus pastiche. The doors were closed. The pumps were deserted. In a fenced section at one side of the forecourt, perhaps a dozen wrecked vehicles were collected, their broken windscreens glittering in the fitful sunlight.

"Stop!" Jill said.

I stared at her.

"I want to look," she said. "Stop."

So I drove in and we sat there with the engine off and the heater running. Every so often the wind would rock the car, the hanging signs in the forecourt would creak, and Jill would say something like, "Why do these people buy such fast cars when the speed limit is forty miles an hour?" She might have been watching someone's things being thrown into the back of a van in a Peckham sidestreet. She might have been complaining: "We'll be next. Don't worry about that. They'll be

throwing us in the back of a van next."

"I don't know," I said.

"You never know anything," she said.

She was watching a fattish woman in a pink cardigan and pale blue skirt walking slowly round and round one of the wrecks, staring as intently at it as if she thought of buying it. Its windscreen was crossed with intersecting diagonal fractures. It had been struck suddenly and heavily from the rear off side, so that the boot and the back seat on that side had been pushed up into the driver's position, exposing the rear-offside wheel, over which was bent and tangled the exhaust system and silencer. The event had wrenched and shortened the whole vehicle so that it seemed to occupy less space than it should. At the same time its new shape captured the vigour of the collision, so that you could feel it happening over and over again, like a recording. Loops of rubber windscreen sealant hung down over the contorted metal. It was an old red Alfasud, V-registered. All the wrecks parked there were rear-end collisions. The woman walked round them staring intently, but as if she was thinking of buying not cars but vegetables or curtain material — something engrossing but not all that important. Eventually she walked off with her arms folded, satisfied.

"I don't either," said Jill. "I don't know anything either." She shivered. "We never even had a daughter!" she said. She said: "What did we do to that poor girl?"

She said: "How do you achieve freedom from the future, from endless expectation?"

"I'm not sure I know what you mean."

After I said that she was silent. Did we have a daughter? What did we do with her? What did we do to each other? What was done to us? You write down what can be remembered: but the day is sufficient to its own illusions. You can never recover them. Memory commits you to the nuance. If you act on memory you act on echoes — unpredictable, faint, fading even as they were generated. Eventually I started the car and drove on to the bleak headland at Rouge Nez, bumping along the track past the racecourse until I found somewhere to park. Rain was blowing diagonally across the pocked and rotten turf. Without speaking, Jill opened her door and got out. She wandered about in the empty car park for a bit, then over to the ruined castle at the cliff edge. There she stood, staring out to sea. I wound the window down.

"You'll get cold if you just keep standing there like that."
"I don't care."

We had to shout to be heard.

After about an hour, Allo Johnnie came briskly into view along the coastal path, the short sleeves of his metallic grey shirt flapping in a hot wind. He seemed to float above the ground. Jill waved. He leaned towards her, offering his forearm wrapped in lizards that glittered in the unearthly twilight of a volcanic beach, all impossible harsh violets and greens. She stood waiting for him in the sodden arch of the castle. I watched them embrace, then I started the engine of the car.

'Gifco' originally appeared in Dennis Etchison's 1992 anthology *Metaborror* (USA), but has been significantly expanded since, evolving into the version above. This version will be published in M John Harrison's forthcoming collection *Travel Arrangements*, published in May this year by Orion (£16.99 hb, £9.99 pb), along with several other typically brilliant, obliquely fantastic stories. The same publisher is planning a retrospective this year, which will include reissuing the entire *Viriconium* series as one volume.



hy is popular music, particularly the Top 40 charts, in such a parlous state? It's not just The Dodo growing old, honestly. Okay, I realise it's the lot of the British as we age greyly to shake our heads at the frenetic youngsters on Top of the Pops and mutter: 'It wasn't like that in my day you know and what on earth is this infernal racket?' It grieves me to join this group because, along with short stories and football, music has always been one of the great joys of my life. But it's not just me! My 17-yearold daughter doesn't watch TOTP because she feels alienated by the music thereon. And surely she's their target audience?

Now, The Dodo has written a few songs himself along the way and is still contemplating proper publishing. Yes, I am a frustrated pop star/singer songwriter/performance poet/ etc. Oh I've dabbled. But sadly, my friends, we are facing the death of the lyric. Most 'songs' these days operate on a mind numbingly minimalist approach. A simple keyboard ostinato of maybe eight notes or so is set above a drum pattern. One line of lyric is repeated or sampled ad infinitum. 'I want to feel right tonight. I w-w-wwant, I w-w-w-want...' And basically that's it. Whatever happened to saying something if not profound then at least sensible about the modern human condition?

Music sorted, you then give yourself a fancy moniker like DJ Salaud, don a fireproof suit and stand behind a bank of keyboards which you only ever play (or mime to) with one extended finger. The final touch is to employ a gaggle of gyrating nubiles in halter tops and bikini pants to pump up the apparent sex appeal of your product. Now, don't get me wrong, I can appreciate the insistent pulse of some of these compositions. When Spaz drives past in his black GTi it

the dodo has landed

Allen Ashley

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moniker like DJ
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really rocks da house! Listen, I don't know what you kids consume in Ibiza but do you have to inflict this mindless trash on the straight/sober/educated majority of the population? An endless diet of 138 beats a minute is going to seriously dull your brain. What little you've got, anyway.

Right, while I've got your attention, let's just say a little bit about sampling. 'Oh, it's okay because William Burroughs used to do it you know with his cut-ups and stuff.' Really? The great man never stole wholesale from Stevie Wonder, James Brown, The Bee Gees(!) or The Police(!!) and tried to pass it off as his own really hip, cutting edge, block rocking rap song though, did he? Hold your hands up Coolio, Will Smith, Puff Daddy et al. And by the way, decent people don't sample in literature, actually, old chap. If it does occur, it's called plagiarism and is punishable by death. Or a five book deal with a Vanity Press.

And how about the thorny subject of remixes? As I'm sure many people have despairingly pronounced before: what is the point of remixes? Why not simply get it right the first time around? The First Law of Remix says that there is always some musical idea buried within the mix on a song which can be foregrounded in order to give a fresh and pleasing new slant to a chosen track. Well, the First Law of Remix is total bollocks! Listen up, musos: if you get the Chemical Brothers in to remix your current single, guess what? Yep, they're going to do a great job...of making you sound exactly like The Chemical Brothers!

As you may know, I'm a big fan of early Byrds material. So when The Lightning Seeds successfully covered their song 'You Showed Me', I popped into Woolworth's and bought the CD. A 'single', it contained seven different mixes of the one

song! You know 'Radio Edit',
'Attica Blues Vocal Mix',
'Wiseguys Instrumental' and so
on. Hand on heart, who needs
them? Listen, I've been in
bands. Even at the most mindnumbing rehearsals we would
never play a song seven times
over without practising
something else in between. Is
this still the 80s? Is it still cool
to say to your mates, 'Oh yeah,
I know that song but I've got it
in 12 inch mega breakbeat stylie
and it's crucial, man'? Grow up!

Now, a lot of people I know write horror stories. It's a cliché but true that the most scary stuff happens in real life. There was a story in the newspapers a couple of years back about how a couple had kidnapped a teenage girl. They did all the usual hostage things like blindfolding her, going light on the food, etc. But most horrifying of all was that they forced her to wear headphones and listen all day to dance music played at a blaring volume. They didn't even charge her £10 admission and squirt her with foam at 2AM. Bastards!

All right, maybe I'm just playing up to an image of being a not so old fogey, but doesn't it bother you the way in which whole reams of the expressive English language are usurped and cheapened by fad culture? 'Wicked', 'awesome', 'essential' and a dozen other buzz-words have been rendered tame and meaningless by TV/music/ fashion's endless infantile search for new superlatives. As for 'anthems'? Don't make me laugh! Anthems are supposed to be stirring, invigorating, battle hymns to rouse the passionate spirit. Maybe they even incite belligerent behaviour and should be discouraged but we're talking definitions and semantics here, not politics. 'Rule Britannia' and 'The Hukka' are anthems. Dar dar dar bing bong doof doof is not.

Check it out now, shit head brother!

Something about a Sunday night...

Charles M Saplak



I was smoking a cigarette on my front stoop one Sunday night when three of my former selves visited.

There's something about Sunday nights. I don't know — maybe a kind of sadness in the air. When I was a kid I used to stay up to watch the Ed Sullivan Show, and no matter how funny Topo Gigio was nor how exciting the Beatles were, I'd always know in the back of my mind that my weekend was over and that the next day would be Monday, with its abrupt return to the realities of schedules and desks and algebra and civics books. A little bit like the desperation a night-dreamer feels as the dream begins to slip away...

The three former selves came out of the darkness at the place where my front walk meets the side of the road which runs in front of my house. Karen and Charlene were inside, in bed already. I was leaning against the top step of the porch, savoring the Marlboro, looking up at the night sky.

I heard them before I saw them.

"Is that him?" someone said in a familiar voice.

"This is the place; this is the time," said another.

"Is that me again?" said another voice, one which sounded a lot like Charlene.

I stood up and peered into the darkness. "Who is that?" I asked in a voice halfway between a greeting and a whisper.

The three approached. As they stepped forward into the light coming from my living room window I recognized them. — recognized me.

The three were holding hands. The biggest one, my height, led one the size of a twelve-year-old; that one reached back and led one about as tall as Charlene (she's six years old).

"Do you remember?" the middle one asked. "Do you remember the dream?"

When he said that, it all came back to me. That dream I'd had three times before, of traveling into my own future. I'd never remembered it before, and couldn't now remember what, if anything, I'd brought back

"Are you a magician?" the youngest one asked.

"A what?" I asked. I didn't know what he was taking about. I saw the face I'd seen in my earliest grade school picture: the big front teeth, the hair all askew.

"Are you a magician?" he asked again,

"No," I said, laughing a little. "I'm an accountant."

"What's that?" he asked, his face wrinkling with effort as he mouthed the word. "'Accountant'? Are you like a scuba diver? Or are you like a parachuter?"

"He works in an office," the middle one said over his shoulder to the littlest one. He didn't try to hide the disappointment in his voice as he said this. Then he turned back to me. I could see by his face that he was me at about twelve years old, with the few lonely whiskers, the same flourishing acne.

"Do you ever do any astronomy?" the middle one asked

"No," I said. "I can still pick out the constellations, though."

"How about the Reds?" he asked. "Did you ever catch on with the Cincinnati Reds? Did you even get into their farm system?"

I shook my head, "Never tried out," I said. How

could I tell him that all of his hours of bouncing a ball off the side of the house on Beech Avenue were wasted hours? I looked into his face and watched him look around at my own small house, the crowded neighborhood. I read his expression as he looked at me and I was acutely aware of the cigarette which glowed between my stumpy fingers, and the fat around my neck and legs and belly as I sat there on the concrete steps.

The middle one and the youngest one looked away. I looked into the face of the tallest one. He was my height but was slender and tough, made that way by miles of walking and hours of basketball and frisbee. He wore the beard and moustache and shaggy mane I'd sported in college. And there was that same sardonic grin...

"How about you?" I asked him. "Do you understand?"

He nodded sadly and shrugged. "Yeah, well..." he said, in that forgiving tone with which I'd become so familiar.

Then with his free hand he pointed toward the house that a mansion, and an artist's garret, but a sailboy docked at Bahia Mar, just a plain little suburban house).

"Debbie?" he asked.

Then it was my turn to give that sardonic little grin back to him. "Well, Debbie's got three children, and I hear that she's very, very happy, but none of those children are mine, and Debbie's not inside there."

He looked as if I'd punched him.

It got quiet. We were all four there together for a moment, in the darkness and the cool night air, under the wheeling stars, the three of them holding hands, me sitting separate on my concrete steps.

"Let's go further," said a familiar, small voice. We all looked to the six-year-old.

"Let's go further," he repeated, tugging at the twelveyear-old's hand in that impatient way kids have. "Let's go further to where we become a magician, or an astronaut or something. Let's go turther and get to the happy part."

The three of them retreated down the walk, toward the darkness.

"Wait," I called, more loudly, and more desperately than I wanted to sound.

They looked back. What could I offer them? Should I tell them about my new tax software? The great deal I'd gotten on an adjustable rate mortage? About the good retirement plan I had? I had nothing, nothing, that they could understand.

Could I tell the oldest about Karen? Or would that change things when he meets her a few years ahead in his life?

"Wait," I said again. If I couldn't get them to stay, should I go with them, looking for something? But what? What did I expect from my future? What was I looking for?

The oldest and the youngest held their hands out to

And then behind me the screen door squeaked open. I turned to see Charlene stepping onto the front stoop rubbing her eyes.



"Daddy," she said. She walked toward me. I turned back to look down the sidewalk. They were gone.

She climbed onto my lap. "Daddy, I had a dream." I tossed away the cigarette and held her. "Sugar, you can't come out here with nothing on your feet."

"I had a dream," she repeated.

"Do you remember it? Do you want to tell Dad about

She thought for a while. "I don't remember it. Can I stay up with you? Who were you talking to?"

I let her sit on my lap for a minute or two. Overhead the stars continued on, familiar constellations I could still call by the names I'd learned in childhood.

"Talking to myself, Sugar," I told her.

The night was cool and still. There was no sign of anybody on the street. I held her for a while, taking her bare feet in my hands and rubbing them against the chill. Then I stood up, still holding her.

"Time to go in, and put you back to bed," I said.

"Can't I slay up?" she asked.

"Just can't, Sugar," I told her. "Tonight's Sunday. Tomorrow we all go back to work."

Charles writes a lot, and lives with his family in Roanoke, Virginia, where the Blue Ridge mountains meet the Appalachian mountains. His hobbies are gardening and woodworking.

far away as he could from the rowdy parties of Ios and the commercialism of Mykonos. He'd had enough. The tourist season was smoked out and the recommended cure for heartbreak hadn't worked. The word was that this particular island had turned its back on tourists, that it neither needed nor wanted them, and that if you were not lying to yourself and you really did want to get away from it all, this was the place to go.

e went to the island to get as

Sunlight lancing off the brilliant white paint of the hull had him squinting as he stepped off the inter-island ferry. Even in the dazzle the tiny port exhibited a post-industrial, neglected character. The place wasn't designed to take tourists and back-packers, and he had to step smartly around coils of rope and tarred capstans. Disinclined to practise his Greek on one of the grizzled old mariners languishing on the quayside, he dithered and scratched his head. Other passengers hurried away or were collected in rattle-trap trucks. Only two minutes on the island and the long tooth of loneliness was beginning to bite.

Centuries of spice-trading hung in the air of the old port. Dank warehouses of biscuit-coloured brick were crumbling into the water. Empty, cobwebby bars of fretwork shadows dotted the small waterfront, and the harbour slumbered under pearly, inspirational light.

He had a battered old Giffords, found on a Mykonos beach. As a tour guide its yellowing pages were hopelessly out of date, but he savoured the elegant Edwardian prose and its sniffy English reserve. About the island the book had very little to say, except to recommend that one should 'quit the port at the earliest opportunity' and make for the west coast, where there were mastic villages and deserted, thrilling beaches. The island was the richest in Greece for *mastic*: the resin on the bushes crystallises, harvested by the women, to be sold on for its aromatic properties. And on one of the beaches, the guidebook indicated, lay strewn the rubble of a marble temple to Aphrodite. The author claimed to have spent a sleepless night there under

At midday he climbed aboard a sweltering bus, sharing a seat with a crone in widow's black. Partially hooded by a dark cotton headscarf, her tooled-leather face could have been a thousand years old. On her lap rested a cardboard box, in which there was something live, black and feath-ery. The old woman dipped in a bag for seed which she sucked in her toothless mouth, occasionally letting some of the seed fall into the box. At some point along the journey she offered him a seed, which he accepted and tried to nibble with good grace.

"Pou pas?" she asked energetically. "Where are you going?"

"Here." He pointed on his map.

She clucked at him. "Why? There are no bars. No tavernas. Nothing." She repeated the word for nothing with heavy emphasis. "Why go there?"

He wanted to explain a need for seclusion, but it was obvious she'd already decided he was a lunatic. The Greeks seemed to regard any solitary act, like hiking in the hills, as an expression of mental illness or depression; even in his own experience, a casual stroll would be quite likely to attract the desperate sympathy of an entire family who must then insist on keeping one company. Far better, he'd discovered, to lie about the purpose of your expedition and pretend to be going to see a man about a goat.

"Married?" she wanted know. This familiarity was also normal for Greeks.

"Yes." He had no intention of going into detail about Alison.

"Children?"

"Yes," he lied, not wanting to evoke the universal sympathy accorded to the childless.

She spent the next few moments engaging every other passenger on the bus in his business. His Greek let him down as the pitch of her voice grew animated, even agitated. Everyone else was leaning forward and regarding him with rather too much interest. He still had the book open at the map. She tapped it vigorously and spat. Then she smacked her gums together conclusively. He was relieved when, along with most of the other passengers, his new acquaintance disembarked at one of the *mastic* villages.

When he came to get off the bus, the driver shook his head before driving off, leaving him standing in a cloud of diesel-exhaust on a parched, volcanic hillside.

Below the blue Aegean darted with sodium light. Hoisting backpack and tent, he descended the baked-earth path. It was some hike. Huge boulders ticked with heat. The hum of millions of insects among the sticky-looking mountain vegetation was like the idling of a vast and invisible engine.

The climb down was almost two hours under a merciless sun. He thought about Alison. "There's only one solution to a woman who doesn't want you, and that's another woman." Peter had poured his advice like an after-dinner liqueur. "Go to Greece. Have some experiences. You'll get over her. Exhaust yourself on a romantic island with some beautiful French woman. Fall in love with a German goddess. Cry your eyes out over a Danish siren. Go to Greece. Visit the Gods."

He had swallowed Peter's prescription, hoping even that his classical studies in ancient Greek would help him get by. It



didn't, but after making a fool of himself a few times he worked hard at the demotic. Four months had been spent islandhopping, camping, visiting the sights, the antiquities. Some days were lonely; some days were spent partying with people he didn't really want to be with. There was a dalliance with a beautiful French woman, and a night of shockingly rough passion with a Norwegian girl. Then towards the end of the season he woke, and not for the first time, with his face in the sand, his dry mouth tasting of aniseed, and decided the cure hadn't worked.

The worst night was when he found himself drunk and blubbering on a beach. A small dog, rib-thin and suffering from appalling mange trotted across and licked his hand in pity. He stopped feeling sorry for himself, brought the dog a meal and phoned home to see how things stood.

Alison answered the phone and told him that she and Pete had got together. He



laughed. For the first time in four months, he actually laughed. He laughed for so long he woke with his face in the sand for the second morning running. Then he decided to come to the island and do some thinking.

Approaching the bay he saw not the promised temple, but a tiny whitewashed Byzantine church with red terracotta roof. Higher up the beach of fine volcanic grey sand a fringe of trees marked off an area of deciduous scrub, contrasting emerald green with the barren ochre rock of the hillside above. The leaves of the scrub were peculiarly luminous and verdant, and he suspected that somewhere there he might find the sweetwater spring promised in his copy of Giffords.

The church was built in the centre of the ruined temple. Fluted marble columns lay half-submerged in the sand, along with toppled capitals and broken plinths. Perhaps the Christian builders of the small church wanted to take advantage of the

marble foundation; or maybe they sought to deactivate the power of the old gods. The tiny chapel itself had a dilapidated air as if it too were a relic of a broken culture. He tried the door. Unusually for an isolated Greek church, it was locked.

Deciding to pitch his tent under the shady protection of the trees, he moved further up the beach but was soon dismayed. It seemed he had company. Pitched between the trees at irregular intervals were six or seven other tents of differing shapes and sizes. All of the tents faced the sea, and in every case the original canvas or nylon colour had been bleached out by salt spray and harsh sunlight.

Passing by the tents, he tried to peek inside to see what kind of people were there, but the flaps were closed and there was no sound from within. Perhaps they were all in siesta, but there was no one swimming, and no other activity on the beach. After pitching his tent he went looking for the sweetwater spring, but couldn't locate it. He'd brought enough water for two or possibly three days if economical; but he had in mind staying a little longer. No one came out of the other tents, and no one returned to them either. Eventually the sunset turned the sea ember red, but after the sun had dipped under the water there was no moon and it quickly got cold. He cast about for wood to make a fire but he'd left it too late; so he climbed into his sleeping bag and read his Giffords by torchlight.

'A quite singular and beautiful cove,' the Giffords reported, 'but I do not care ever to return there.'

Sometime in the night he was woken by a noise. He poked his head out of the tent. The sea, no more than twenty yards away, was calm, but there was still no moon. A light flickered, up at the other end of the beach, near the temple. The light hovered briefly, shifted, then it went out. He zipped up his tent and lay back, straining to listen for further sounds. Nothing. He opened his clasp knife and put it under his pillow.

In the morning he lay dozing in his sleeping bag, unable to surface. As the sun got up it became impossibly hot under the nylon and he wrenched himself awake. Tumbling out of the tent he walked like a somnambulist in an undeviating line to the sea. The water was chilly, effervescing on his skin. In the middle of snorting and splashing he suddenly remembered the other tents. There was still no sign of life. He'd hoped to be able to ask someone about water. Eventually he peeked inside the tent nearest to his own.

It was empty. So was the next. Examining them one by one he discovered the tents were all abandoned. No equipment had been left behind, nor any hint that their former occupants were about to return. Perhaps the local Greeks pitched them for convenient use at weekends or holiday times. It was October after all, and even though the days were still hot, the season was turning on the hinge of the Aegean autumn, and the nights could get very cold. No, he decided, he was alone, and with that realisation a slight breeze picked up off the water. One of the tent-flaps fluttered in the airstream.

He went about naked. Eating only when hungry from the things he'd brought with him, he also went without cigarettes and alcohol for the first time in fifteen years. Much of the first day was spent searching for the fresh spring, without success. At the temple, on one of the marble blocks, he found the ugly carcass of a sea-snake. Buzzing with flies, its razor-fine teeth were bared and its rotting scales gleamed magnificently. He found, under a stone, the key to the church.

Inside, a small icon hung on the wall above the altar, but the lamps were dustcovered and hadn't been lit for some time. A bottle of oil and matches stood on a small table. He lit a lamp and a breath of light seemed to sigh around the tiny chamber. The flame winked on the silver icon. The face enclosed in the silver frame, one of the patriarchs of Greek orthodoxy, seemed stirred to anger rather than to one of the tender emotions. He got out, but left the lamp burning.

Soon it was dusk and this time he had his fire assembled ready for the dark. He was just finishing up a meal of olives, bread and cheese when he saw a dark flag-like figure by the water's edge. Again the dying sun had turned the water the colour of lice coals. The figure approached in silhouette, his back to the sun, seemingly clothed in flapping black rags. A thrill of alarm passed through him with unnecessary force.

It was a Greek Orthodox priest. For some reason he didn't feel comforted. His skin flushed. The priest carried his stovepipe hat in his hand, his pace diminishing as he came closer. Finally he stood off by a good few yards.

"Yia sas!" he said to the priest, forcing a smile, "Yia!"

"Yia sas," the priest echoed quietly, eyeing him suspiciously, peering round him at the tent. A single bead of sweat ran darkly between the priest's eyebrows.

Even though as a traveller he was the xenos, the stranger, he tried to offer the priest some of the food he'd been eating. This desperate parody of Greek courtesy irritated the priest, who declined with a gesture. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"Camping." He wanted to add something rude. He'd taken a huge and irrational dislike to the priest.

"It's not a good place for that."

"Why?"

The question was ignored. "What do you do here?"

"I swim. I fish." It was true; he'd brought a hand-line along and hoped to catch something.

"Dangerous to swim here. Very dangerous. There are currents out there that can take you out to sea. Very dangerous."

Not having noticed any currents while swimming in the bay earlier, he raised his eyebrows at the priest. "Can you show me where there is water?"

"Water?"

"Yes! Water! For drinking! My book says there's fresh water somewhere." The priest, startled by this sudden animation, was torn by how to respond and merely mopped his sweating brow. "For goodness sake, it's only water!"

The priest unaccountably turned his back and began to retrace his steps. He leapt to his feet and followed. "How long are you staying here?" the priest barked over his shoulder.

"Not long."

When they reached the temple, the priest led him behind the marble blocks and grudgingly pointed to a slab. "There. But it's brackish."

Watched by the priest he removed the slab to uncover a shallow well. With a cupped hand he drew out a few drops of water. It tasted fresh and cool and clear. The priest's nostrils began to twitch as if he was sniffing the air. "Have you been burning *mastic*?" he demanded angrily, mopping his brow with a handkerchief.

"Why would I do that?"

"Are you certain?"

"Of course I'm certain!"

He'd had enough of this priest who, scowling, went inside the church and closed the door. He retreated up the beach. Some time later when he returned to the church, it was locked and the priest had gone.

He lit a fire and pretty soon had a decent blaze going, though the piles of thin scrub flared too quickly. Crackling fiercely, it sent white sparks arcing across the fire before burning smokily. Very soon he realised what the priest had been talking about. The incense-rich smell of burning *mastic* was everywhere.

He'd unwittingly piled dead *mastic* bushes on his fire. The entire beach was already smelling like a gargantuan temple. Flames writhed in the dark, flinging indigo shadows across the sand, and with the waves crowding nearer behind his back the fire assumed a sacramental quality. He sat with a blanket around his shoulders, hypnotised by the flames, drugged by perfumed smoke. He felt his forehead: his

temperature was high.

When he awoke sweating in his tent the next morning he had no recollection of having gone to bed. Outside, his fire had burned out, and he stumbled across the sand and into the cold water, where he was shocked properly awake. While brushing his teeth in seawater he spotted activity at the other end of the beach.

Three or four figures, perhaps a family, were busy close to the temple. Conscious of his own nakedness, he splashed through the water and jogged back to his tent, where he pulled on some shorts. He sat in his tent, wondering what to do.

Of course, he didn't have to *do* anything. They were campers, just like him. Perhaps they would cook *souvlaki* on a barbecue, stay for an hour or two and go home. What difference could it make? Concerned to announce his presence, he hit on the solution of going to draw some water from the spring.

He carried his water bottle the length of the beach. Four figures were busy with something on the ground. Rather than occupying one of the available tents, they had rigged up a large but crude shelter, immediately adjacent to the temple. Advertising his presence by a noisy approach, he actually got quite close before one of them looked up. Then all four of them stopped what they were doing and gaped back at him, open-mouthed.

He had the uncanny sensation that he was himself a ghost.

The older of the two men rose very slowly and stared, his hands hanging loose at his sides.

"Yia sas."

"Yia sas," they replied, in precise and hasty concert.

"Where did you come from?" the older man said quickly, still in a state of astonishment. The accent was difficult, but just comprehensible. They were gypsies in all probability. When the tent at the far end of the beach was pointed out to him the man stepped forward, his eyes followed the line of the pointing finger. His manly perspiration was strong and blended with an overpowering scent of mastic. Then one of the women spoke rapidly. Only the word philoxenia stood out, like a bright pearl among flat stones, before the man gestured to a sharing of the meal they were preparing. They had been slicing some kind of offal on a marble slab. It looked less than appetising.

The older man went into the rough tent and came out proffering a pottery tumbler filled to the brim with blood-red wine. It was slightly salty, acidic and rather thick, but it was to be drunk. Reciprocation of Greek hospitality demanded so. It was, after all, entirely possible that they were





N ROTTING BY THE TEMPLI

entertaining one of the Gods unawares, and he should behave as if he believed that to be the case. He tipped back the wine and they immediately seemed to relax; except for the younger man, who seemed unable to do anything but stare.

It was difficult not to stare back. The family were distinctive from most Greeks. These were darker skinned, and yet with copper hair, totally unlike the blue-black of most island Greeks. But they were not of the Asiatic descent seen in the islands close to Turkey. Gypsies, surely. He had to make a conscious effort to avoid gazing at the younger of the two women. His eyes returned to her time and again as they ate slices of cooked heart and liver, during which the older couple plied him with questions about his former life.

"From England? England, you say?" It was as if he'd stipulated that he had recently arrived from the lost city of Atlantis. Meanwhile the younger man maintained a hostile silence.

He noticed that the locked door of the chapel had been kicked down. He could see the priest's hat and cloak and shoes strewn around the floor. It was while he took in this disturbing detail that he felt a hand lightly brush his shoulder. "Will you swim with me?" the younger woman asked, smiling.

She ran the same hand through her hair and the sun flaked fire around her. He felt a jab to the viscera. Her fingers playing with her hair were uncommonly long. Her white teeth flashed; the heavy lashes of her oval eyes blinked lazily.

"Swim! Swim!" said the father, waving towards the water.

"Will you swim with us?" he asked the younger man, trying to make some sort of point, but the fellow shook his head contemptuously, picked up a hand-line and jogged to the water's edge.

The young woman set off up the beach. "It's better this way," she murmured. None of her group seemed inclined to follow, and the two of them clambered over some rocks, going out of view of the others. There she slipped off her rough costume and waded in, her shins swishing through the water.

He blinked at the naked girl. She had a large birthmark on her bottom. As he slipped off his own trunks and followed her she waited, her eyes unashamedly assessing his body. Unconsciously, or perhaps not, she moistened her lips with her tongue. When he drew abreast of her she turned in a smooth motion and made an elegant crawl stroke through the water. Following, he found it difficult to keep up, feeling the tug of a strong undertow. The priest hadn't been lying about the swift currents. Afraid, he swam back alone.

He sat on the shoreline panting hard,

trying to spot her. Alarmed over her safety he considered calling the others, but at last he descried a tiny dot returning from far out. Eventually she fell down beside him, uncomfortably close. Hardly out of breath she said, "But you didn't come all the way!" A teasing note in her voice.

"Not me."

She squeezed water from her hair and it trickled down the ridge of her spine, where he wanted to brush his fingers. With her toes dipped in the water she wriggled her bottom deeper into the grey sand. A strong whiff of mastic incense came off the girl. Again his skin flushed, as it had in the presence of the priest, but differently this time. It was as if some warning chill came off her, some marine odour alerting him to a danger he had no capacity to understand. She locked eyes with him, and her breathing became shallower. He wanted to lean across and take the dark, erect berry of her nipple in his mouth. Too afraid, he asked her name.

"Alethea." She stepped back into her beach garb. An important moment had slipped.

But he was glad he hadn't chanced his arm, because seconds later the young man appeared. He paced by, scowling, suspicious. A fishing line trailed from his wrist, and swinging from the hook was a vicious looking sea-snake, jaw open, fangs bared, exactly like the specimen rotting by the temple. A wave of hostility emanated from the young man as he passed, and it occurred to him that he'd made a mistake.

The situation was unclear. "Is that your brother?" he asked Alethea.

"Of course."

So why, he wanted to ask, is he behaving like a jealous lover? But after all, he was the *xenos* here, the one who didn't know the rules. Perhaps her nudity was innocent. Perhaps only her brother of all of them guessed the sensational effect she was having on an outsider.

For the next two or three days he ate, drank and swam with the family. They made fires in the evening and in the incense clouds they talked little. He went on long walks with Alethea. Together they explored nearby beaches, rock-pools and sea-caves, all of the time their hands almost touching and he never once thought of England or of Alison.

One afternoon, as they waded between rocks carpeted with slippery, luminous green weed, both naked having been swimming, Alethea missed her footing and grabbed his arm. It was the first time they had touched. Again he felt a visceral punch and a white-hot flare in his brain before he pressed his mouth roughly to hers, tasting salt-spray on her lips, scenting that strange mixture of marine odour and incense. Her

hand cupped around his genitals. At that moment Alethea's brother chose to reveal himself.

Leaping from behind a rock he ran at them, puce in the face, screaming incomprehensible insults. But he failed to follow through, and quickly stalked away.

"It was only a kiss!"

Alethea looked stung and betrayed.

He knew he was wrong. "No. It wasn't only a kiss," he said. "I want to be with you."

"You can't," she said simply. "Let's go back."

They walked hand in hand along the sand, but she let go as they approached her family. Her brother was still red-faced and angry. Her mother too looked furious, but her father, scratching the back of his leathery neck, looked sad. An impenetrable conversation began which he couldn't follow, though several times he heard them refer to him in the usual way.

At last he said, "I want to be with your daughter. I'm prepared to do anything it takes."

"It's not that simple," her father said.

"What could be more simple?"

"You don't understand. You are a stranger. Even if you were one of the local Greeks from this island, it would still be impossible."

"Is it because you are gypsies?"

"Gypsies? Ha!"

"And anyway," the boy spat, "you are not worthy!"

A furious quarrel broke out between the family, bitter and vindictive. Alethea broke away and ran up the beach. He went to go after her, but her father held him by the arm. "Leave her. It's no good. It's no good for you."

He shrugged off the old man and took off after Alethea. She'd gone beyond the rocks on to the next bay. "What do they mean?" he asked when he caught up with her. "Why do they say these things?"

She shook her head. They sat on the sand holding each other, her staring out to sea at some invisible point on the horizon. At last she said, "I sometimes think they don't want me to have anyone."

"Has this happened before?"

She nodded sadly, and he felt profoundly disappointed to be a second-comer. "They won't allow us to put this beach behind us."

He nodded, trying to accommodate the Greek figure of speech.

"No, you don't understand at all. It isn't just a way of speaking. It means lovers must go on, to another beach." She pointed out to sea, to a rock barely discernible in the distance. "To that beach. But I don't think you can make it."

It dawned on him that she was being quite literal. Some kind of gypsy ritual per-

haps, a rite-of-passage for a courting couple. "Swim? You mean swim to that rock? What are you saying?"

"We could get away. I would be at your side, swimming with you."

She was proposing an elopement! He slumped to the sand and sat with his head in his hands. "But that's out of the question!"
"Why?"

He had to think about it, but his head was on fire. She was actually inviting him to elope, and he couldn't think of a single reason why they shouldn't. The gravity of the moment pounded the beach like a wave. She was still searching his eyes for an answer. It shocked him that he was being offered a truly spontaneous moment of decision, in which he could make something astonishing happen or lose her forever. He'd been granted a miraculous opportunity to redeem his life with a single passionate act.

And yet what she proposed was madness. It was heady and dangerous. He looked at the rock in the distance, trying to calculate the swim. Last time he'd tried something like that he'd turned back exhausted at far less than half the distance. He feared the currents. But that phrase haunted, the one about 'putting the beach behind him'. He thought of the uselessness and the sadness of his life back in England. He had nothing to return to there. He gave no thought to what happened once the rock was reached. He assumed at that point the statement had been made, that they would cross a symbolic or ritual line beyond which now challenge could be made to them. Then they would swim back.

Drunk on the romance of the situation, and on the reckless inspiration of her youth, he took one last look round. In the few days he'd been camping on the beach the dye had been almost bleached from his tent. It only convinced him to leave it all with the row of other tattered tents abandoned under the fringe of trees.

"You don't have to do this," Alethea said. He said nothing. She stripped off her costume and waded out into the water. Not until she was waist deep did she turn and beckon him to follow.

The water was buoyant and he felt strong. They swam for a long time. He even felt the sun shifting in the sky. Once out of a sense of anxiety, he tried to look back to the shore, but Alethea rebuked him. After swimming for almost two hours, the distant rock seemed no nearer.

He began to feel cold. Then he felt the undertow strike, and despite his efforts, began to sense he was failing to make progress. The distance between him and Alethea increased.

For the first time since they'd set out he took a lungful of water. Coughing and thrashing about, he had to rescue himself from a moment of panic. The distance between them widened, though he could hear her exhorting him to stay close. In a thrill of horror he wondered if she might abandon him; because he also sensed that if she didn't make the pace then they would both fail. The current was sweeping him to the side. He couldn't make progress and found it impossible to swim in her wake.

His muscles ached. While trying to lie on his back to snatch a moment's rest the current dragged and flipped him back on his stomach. He took another lungful of water. When he looked back he could barely discern the shore.

And when he turned, he heard the cry of a gull and Alethea was gone.

Calling her name and struggling against the current he lost all sense of direction. He swam desperately in the bearing he thought she had gone, his muscles turning to a fiery, unresolved slush and his feet cramping. The cold was penetrating and primal.

He despaired. Shouting her name again, in his panic and confusion he heard himself calling not for her, but for Alison. It was all too much; not just the swim, but everything that had driven him to this island, and to this pass. In his overwhelming tiredness he felt a tremendous desire to simply close his eyes. The possibility of surrender seemed at last sweet and comforting. He dropped his arms into the water, the better to accept the chilly sleep.

But anger sparked him awake again. Turning, he tried to swim. Still the current dragged. He took a lungful of air, and dived down, trying to swim under the surface tow, finding he could make better progress that way. He surfaced, breathed deep and dived again. He did this several times, until he had escaped the spiralling current. Catching sight of the headland, he made agonising progress towards it.

Then the land was before him. It was not the distant rock: he'd returned to his starting point. The sun was setting, the sea was burning ember-red. Crawling out of the water on hands and knees, he collapsed, shuddering, weeping, clawing and biting at the sand with relief. The gritty particles of sand under his clawing fingernails were like grains of light, jewels of deliverance, shredded tokens of the life he had almost thrown away in this desperately stupid act.

When he woke it was dark. He got to his feet and staggered up the beach. He was alone. Desperate for water he cast around in the dark trying but failing to locate the spring. Returning to his tent he found a drop of water in a plastic bottle. Shivering uncontrollably he unrolled his sleeping bag and climbed inside.

When morning came around, his muscles were on fire. He lay sweating under the nylon, thinking about what he'd done.

His head pounded. He got out of the tent and went to find water. There was neither spring nor the stone slab which had covered it. It was absurd: both himself and Alethea's family had been sustained by the spring over several days.

Alethea's family had made a tidy departure. There was no trace of them, not even an impression in the sand of where they'd been sheltered. Neither was there any sign of their campfire. The charred remains and blackened stones of his own fire were there, sure enough, further along the beach, but where was the evidence of the fire around which he'd spent those few happy evenings? The sun pulsed directly overhead. Sand gusted along the beach.

He decamped hurriedly. The bus which had delivered him there was due to pass again that afternoon. At the temple he saw what was perhaps the only evidence of the gypsy family's presence. A second decomposing sea-snake lay on a broken plinth, next to the first one he'd seen, almost like an offering.

For the last time he glanced back at the row of tattered tents, and again he wondered to whom they belonged. Hoisting his pack he made the climb up the hillside. At the roadside he sat on his pack until the bus came, and flagged it to stop.

It was the same driver. He looked somewhat surprised, and when asked for water he produced a tin of sprite from a coolbox. "Take it. Where have you been all these days?"

"Down on the beach."

"Alone?"

He started to explain that there had been other people, and that a priest had shown him where to find water, and that —

"Priest? There is no priest on this side of the island."

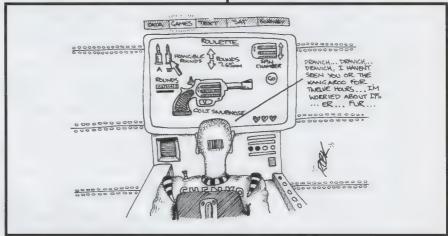
The driver stared blankly then crunched through his gears as the bus moved up the hill. After that he would only look at his passenger through the rear-view mirror. "I wouldn't go to that beach," he said.

"Why not?"

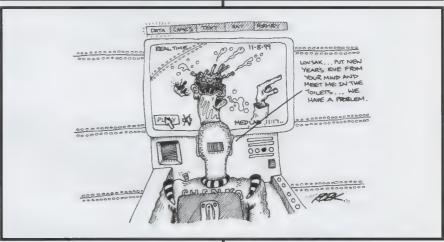
He merely shook his head. As they travelled back across the island, stopping at the *mastic* villages with their singular, geometrically patterned houses, the stranger thought of the last few days, and of Alethea. He wondered where she was. He thought also of the row of tattered tents under the trees, and wondered if he had narrowly escaped something deeply dangerous; or if he had forfeited some experience transcendent and beautiful.

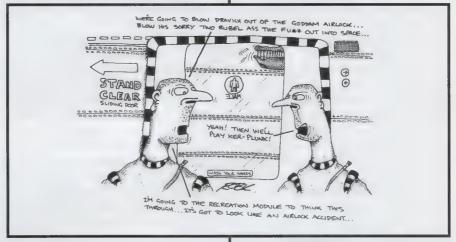
Graham Joyce's most recent novel *Indigo*, explored the themes of seeing, invisibility and trepanning and got him into hot water with the 'The Indigo Society', a bizarre group who claimed that he spilled their secrets in publishing the novel. (See The Review.)

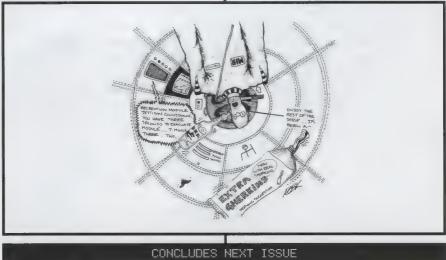




ROB KIRBYSON







THE DAVID MATHEW INTERVIEW

Every page has the imprimatur, the stamp; has a seal of approval — a guarantee of literary quality. And every paragraph is solid and stately, for Peter Straub, once described (accurately, by Clive Barker) as a 'classicist' builds up architecture. Or more specifically, architecture that lives and breathes; architecture that has learnt how to dance. From the beginning of his career in fiction, which was *Marriages* in 1973 (though he had published poetry earlier), Straub spoke in a clear, commanding voice; and from his first foray into the horror genre, which was *Julia* (1975), he displayed a clear understanding of tradition, pace, belief and feeling: important factors if one wishes to be appreciated by one's peers. When I ask the author how he feels he fits in among his contemporaries (and the question is deliberately vague!), Straub replies with the sort of humour that one does not necessarily expect, and with a roster of fellow artists that suggests that Straub is still content to be regarded as a horror writer:

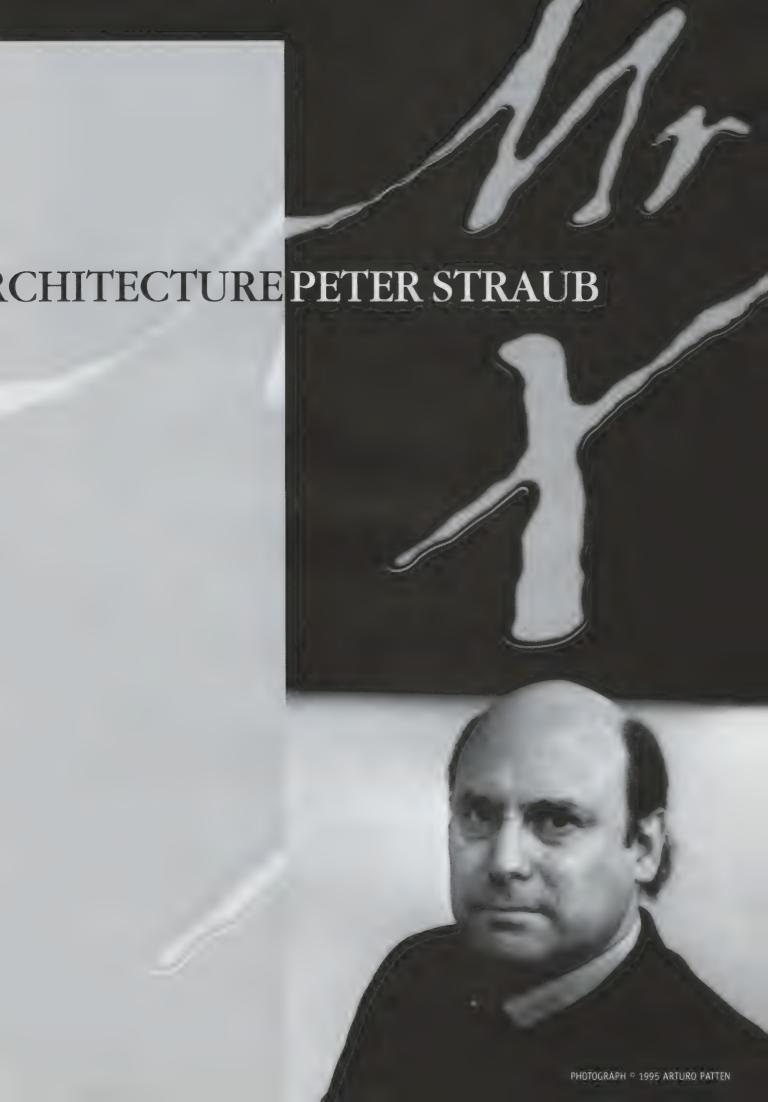
'Well, you call it vague, but I call it obdurate unto total mystery,' he says. 'I call it caille en sarcophage. How should I know? I've managed to hang around long enough to be given a degree of reflexive, pro forma respect, which is okay, and if I make it through another fifteen to twenty years, I might get a Life Achievement Award, depending on the jury. My contemporaries are Stephen King, Thomas Tessier, Ramsey Campbell, Charles Grant, Dennis Etchison, James Herbert, Jack Ketchum/Dallas Mayr, Anne Rice, Les Daniels, John Saul, Whitley Strieber, Brian Lumley, Graham Masterton, Dean Koontz and few others. Good Michael McDowell used to be a contemporary, but he died this year, and Robert McCammon was a kind of younger contemporary but claims to have resigned. John Coyne, whom I always liked, vanished from our field, I hope into a more fruitful one. Amongst all these people, I fit in as the second- or third-tallest and the most bald. I write longer sentences than most of the others, maybe because I probably like Henry James more than they do. Almost all of my contemporaries have seen far more horror movies than I have, especially Ramsey Campbell and Les Daniels. After having listed all these names, what most strikes me is that they make up an extremely entertaining group, and I'm grateful to fit in amongst them at all.

We might argue that Straub stopped writing Horror (capital H, marketing pigeonhole) directly after finishing The Talisman, which he co-wrote with Stephen King and was published in 1984; and we might say this because the book that followed was Koko (1988). Despite the fact that it won the World Fantasy Award, Koko contains only minimal nods towards the fantastic, and was not published as a Horror novel either. But nevertheless, this tour de force — this thriller about Vietnam veterans and a serial killer is a horror novel if we use the word to mean the emotion that stows aboard books of any genre, and even aboard mainstream fiction, rather than the definition of 'books with blood and guts'. Do we see the distinction? Despite the perception of too many people — really, too many — horror does not have to mean fiction about gore or ghosts per se. (Nor does there have to be a shock at the end of the story, or at the end of every chapter.) No more than science fiction is that about spaceships. What Straub has managed to do, as Horror has gone through its cycles of deterioration and analepsis, is remain true to a personal vision; and has had the savvy to work on novels that can be appreciated by people who only read either inside or outside the genres. Because genres slough their skin from time to time: it's only natural. It's a way of warding off the disease of indifference; or to leap the barricades put up by readers — to offer up something new. And genres, above all, should address and provoke the reader's mood, which Straub also achieves. A thriller, for example, that does nothing for the reader's blood has failed, categorically; but Straub has kept his work sharp and engaging by addressing two key themes: the loss of innocence, and the irritability of a past that wants to be spoken about. He agrees with my assessment, although adds: 'I might replace "irritability" with "implacability".'

Furthermore, and interestingly, it is possible to add that Straub works in multiples of ten, or thereabouts. Although the figures are not spot-on accurate, some interesting patterns have developed, notwithstanding certain overlaps. Just look at the evidence. With his wife he spent a decade in England and Ireland, mainly writing poetry (such as 'Ishmael' [1972], 'Open Air' [also 1972], and the subsequent round-up, *Leeson Park and Belsize Square: Poems 1970–1975*, which was published later in 1983), but also some early novels. 'We went back to an almost unrecognizable America after a decade in Dublin and London for a couple of reasons. Our son, Benjamin, had just turned two, and we would soon have had to place him in a school, probably one of the Comprehensives in our general area of North London. Doing so would have meant his quick assimilation into the world of English — or at least North London — schoolchildren, with the consequent loss of his identity as an American. (Many

DANCING AF

One day while I was regarding the extravagant cornucopia displayed along the meat counter of our local supermarket, a woman I had never seen before pushed her cart next to mine and without preamble said, "I have to tell you, my first three abortions were really awful"



would find this an excellent reason for staying in good old Crouch End.)

'We could have delayed our return for another two or three years, but for a matter of timing. My first real breakthrough collided with the last months of Callaghan's Labour government, which had every intention of enjoying my success as much as I did. Por years, I had uncomplainingly paid my taxes to the Inland Revenue with the feeling of fulfilling my share of a decent bargain between private income and social welfare. The bargain no longer seemed so decent when I was faced with the obligation of surrendering something like 90% of the revenue from *Ghost Story* in taxes. I had no idea if I could ever duplicate the book's success; on the whole, it seemed more than a little unlikely. My accountant entered a string of figures on a strip of adding machine tape about a yard long, ripped it out and showed it to me. "This is what you're going to owe if you stay," he said. "I suggest that you put your house on the market last month and leave England yesterday." We left a few months later.

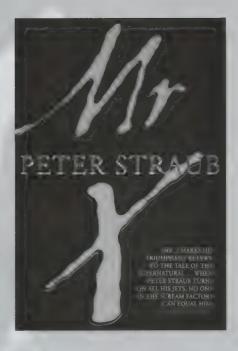
'We should have anticipated having to suffer culture shock, but because we were returning to our own country we did not, and it hit us like a tidal wave. Our neighbors in beautiful little Westport, Connecticut, might as well have been Martians. They spoke in flat, uninflected voices about banalities, endlessly. No one had anything like a sense of irony, irony was a foreign language, an unhealthy affection. Sincerity was the real deal — you were supposed to grip the other fellow's hand, look him in the eye and be as sincere as you could damn well pretend to be, because that's how you got him to like you, and being liked was important. In a world where everyone likes everyone else, or puts up a good show of liking everyone else, an immediate, false intimacy prevails. Boundaries dissolve, discretion becomes a form of snobbery. One day while I was regarding the extravagant cornucopia displayed along the meat counter of our local supermarket, Waldbaum's, a woman I had never seen before pushed her cart next to mine and without preamble said, "I have to tell you, my first three abortions were really awful." My wife and I adjusted, but it took a couple of years.'

Straub's overtly supernatural and/or fantastical fiction was written, also, over a period of approximately ten years, though as I say, the periods were not successive; there were overlaps (and the timescales are flukes anyway, given the publication schedules of most publishing houses, but nevertheless). The supernatural work—including *Julia, If You Could See Me Now* (1977), *Ghost Story* (1979), *Shadowland* (1980), and *Floating Dragon* (1982)—saw Peter Straub make a big name for himself among the hard-hitters of commercial fiction.

But he rarely reads his very early work. 'It would be like walking through a house I'd moved out of years before, sort of interesting but not really, like an exercise in premeditated nostalgia. There have been times when I reread — or at least leafed through — something because I'd sent a copy to a friend, and what usually happened was that I noticed dozens and dozens of clumsy phrases I wished I could rewrite.' Some writers can remember every first line they have ever penned. Can he? 'Oh, certainly. Two of them are "Call me Ishmael" and "There was no possibility of taking a walk that day". Pretty good, huh? I am also very fond of the first line of Floating Dragon: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times". Man, that was a really good day — I can still remember the way I felt when I wrote that line...' And asked to sketch out his novels briefly for the benefit of someone who hasn't read any of his work (a bastard of a question, I don't mind admitting), Straub responds in a humorous tone — as of someone engaged in mickey-taking oneupmanship — that one can imagine served him well in our green and pleasant land, where sarcasm and irony are voices we all use well. 'I'll pass on the invitation to write novelhaikus,' he replies, 'and just say that anyone wishing to look into my work might well start with Ghost Story and go on to Shadowland and Koko.'

It was *Koko* (1988) which began the third stage (if you like) of Straub's career, after the poetry and the Horror — and this has lasted longer than ten years, admittedly: the more reality-based, horror-flavoured, devilishly intricate thriller. He informs me that 'it would be impossible to pick out any single "favourite" of his own novels, because: 'if I did, the other children would get jealous. However, I think I managed to reach a new level with *Koko*, and I will always be grateful for the experience.' It might be argued that the work leading up to *Koko* and the work following it are changes of vehicle rather than changes of gear. Straub says: 'Something happened with *Koko*, all right, a kind of expansion and deepening. To me, it feels less like a switch to a new automobile than getting a better performance out of the old engine by cleaning it from top to bottom and replacing everything needed to be replaced.'

In an interview a long time ago, Straub said that he had been half-expecting some angry comeback from people who fought in Vietnam when he published *Koko*. Twelve years after the book's publication, I wondered what the reactions, in fact, had been like. At the time Straub expressed concerns along these lines — that some



MR X Peter Straub

HarperCollins tpb, 496pp, £10.99 Every year on his birthday, Ned Dunstan has a paralysing seizure in which he is forced to witness scenes of ruthless slaughter perpetrated by a mysterious figure in black whom he calls Mr X. With his birthday fast approaching, Ned is drawn back to his home town, Edgerton, Illinois, by a premonition that his mother is dying. But when Ned becomes the lead suspect in three violent deaths, he begins to realise that he is not the only one who has come home: Ned discovers that he has an identical twin brother who can pass through doors and otherwise defy the laws of nature.

'Mr X marks Straub's triumphant return to the tale of the paranormal and the supernatural... When Peter Straub turns on all his jets, no one in the scream factory can equal him. The plot is challenging, the characters are intriguing in their complexity and the language is a delight' **Stephen King**

people might think: well, who does he think he is, writing about Vietnam when he didn't even fight there. 'Yes, exactly. After all, I was trespassing on sacred ground. That I imagined I had some authentic insight into the experience of combat veterans did not mean they would agree with me. In the end, the response turned out to be very gratifying, on the whole. I got a lot of letters from vets, also from the wives of Vietnam vets, thanking me for getting things right, for making it possible for them to talk about the things that had happened to them. I can hardly express what these letters meant to me... On the other hand, Philip Caputo dismissed the book as yet another objectionable portrayal of Vietnam veterans as psychotics and losers. A guy living in a section of some Californian city called "Little Saigon" who had served in Vietnam and wrote action-adventure novels sent me a photograph of himself seated at his desk holding an automatic rifle while a pretty Vietnamese woman draped herself over his shoulders. The photograph was folded within a letter informing me it was pretty clear, on the evidence of Koko, that I preferred little boys to Asian females. The last line of the letter said, "If you weren't there, shut the fuck up." I wrote back that he ought to give up the pose, writing was writing and there were no rules, all you could do was step up to the plate and take your best swing. Nuts to you, I said to myself as I dropped the letter into the mailbox, and for the next two weeks, every time the doorbell rang I wondered if he and his rifle were paying me a visit.

In some of the novels and novellas since Koko, Peter Straub has begun to create a universe, based on his own characters. Stories are continued, and there are frequent cross-references; the completist has lots to feed on whenever he publishes new material. Here, we'd be referring to Mystery (1990), The Throat (1993), and others. 'Of course. Many fiction writers eventually want to feel that their work forms a single, unified entity. Certain particular themes run through it; an individual point of view can be seen emerging, developing, finding different forms of expression. It is tempting to reinforce this sense of commonality by literalizing it through the use of characters who appear in a number of different books. I have done that, though only to a very limited degree. Where I seem to be creating deliberate cross-links between books, in the "Blue Rose" novels and stories, my ultimate intention was quite different from that of emphasizing the "shared world" nature of the novels. Instead, I was interested in what I guess I could call narrative indeterminacy, in questioning the apparent, taken-for-granted authority of any particular representation of the events in question. Stories attributed to me turn out to have been written by a recurring character who is also a novelist; specific events in the earlier life of one character are later claimed by another; I, the author, become a character, a minor one who has collaborated on the earlier novels with my more perceptive fictional alter ego; the common setting, a medium-sized Midwestern city, changes its name as it migrates from Wisconsin to the Caribbean, then to Illinois...

'The actual Blue Rose murders, which lie at the core of the three novels, yield various incorrect solutions which assume the status of truth. One of the victims is actually unconnected to the case. When, in the third book, we do learn the identity of the Blue Rose murderer, the information comes in a muted, nearly off-hand manner, and the man has died long before. Despite all theories to the contrary, he has no relevance to the crimes presently under investigation. Previous depictions of reality expressed in newspaper stories and fictional accounts have been discredited, and the surest, most accurate tool for the apprehension of the ever-shifting, multilayered enigma called "truth" seems to be imagination — the creation of more fiction.'

Also among the later work is *The Hellfire Club* (1996), which boasts (if the word does not seem too ironic in context) the despicable creature named Dick Dart. It is considerably to Peter Straub's credit that a new variation on the theme of the psychopathic smart-arse can be found: but find one Mr Straub did. Dart is horrendous. 'Dick Dart emerged from the ether during a flight from New York with my wife and children to Puerto Rico. I had been working on *The Hellfire Club* for about a year of everincreasing despair, unable to find anything like a center, a mainspring, as the pages piled up. I thought I was all through, finished, and the only reason I was going to Puerto Rico was that we had already booked the holiday and I thought we might as well enjoy ourselves before the arrival of actual ruin. On the flight, Mr Richard Dart, my favourite lawyer, until then a mere spear-carrier restricted to an appearance in the background of a single scene, leaned forward and whispered into my ear that if I paid attention to him for a couple of minutes he could save my ass, how about it?

'I pulled my notebook out of the carry-on bag and listened to Mr Dart's ideas. And you know what? Mr Dart was a really repulsive guy, but he expressed himself in a surprisingly pungent, funny way. I wrote down everything he said. He wanted to take over the novel, naturally, but in the absence of any better ideas, I gave him his head. Every day for the following week, I reported to the hotel pool with my

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notebook and a supply of pens and took dictation. One thing about Dick Dart, he always had a lot to say.'

And then there are the shorter pieces: the award-winning 'Mr Clubb and Mr Cuff', at the conclusion of which Straub felt 'more satisfied than I should admit. I began more or less blind, knowing only that I wanted to write a revenge story that used "Bartleby" as its foundation. I had just reread the Melville novella and been bowled over by it. The voice appeared the moment I started to write, and the story rolled along under its own steam, getting longer and longer every day. When it was done, everything seemed to fall into place. I thought it was one of the best things I'd ever written, and I still do.' And of course, the latest offering, Pork Pie Hat — which, to nail my colours to the mast, as it were, I will here and loudly declare a bloody masterpiece. What I loved about Pork Pie Hat is that it can be read as having a wealth of possible interpretations. It's incredibly dense — but flows beautifully. Did Straub have to structure and restructure it in order to make all the connections and possibilities work? 'No, I just wrote it from beginning to end. The revisions were all stylistic in nature. I'm glad you liked it.' It, and others, show signs, perhaps, of the author's fondness for reading mysteries, too. 'I do read a lot of mystery novels those by Lawrence Block, Donald Westlake, Sue Grafton, Michael Connelly, Dennis Lehane, plus many others. Whenever one or more of my characters get into a car and drive all over town talking to people, I know I'm imitating Ross Macdonald.'

Pork Pie Hat is the story of a story, which is also true of *The Hellfire Club*. A jazz fan asks his hero for an interview, but gets much more than he bargained for. Said hero, the eponymous saxophone player (who is nobody's idea of a hero if we consider him as a *person*) is knocking at death's door, a prey to drink, depression and malnutrition. I asked Peter Straub how the novella had come about. 'The inspiration for *Pork Pie Hat* came from a long moment in a videotape of "The Sound of Jazz", a live television broadcast in 1957 or 1958 that assembled a lot of great jazz musicians in a studio and let them play whatever they felt like for the space of an entire hour. Just before its conclusion, Billie Holiday sat perched on a stool to sing a blues she had written called "Fine and Mellow" at the center of a circle made up of heroic figures like Ben Webster, Vic Dickenson, Jo Jones, Coleman Hawkins, Roy Eldridge, Rex Stewart, and — above all — the tenor saxophonist Lester Young, then only months from the end of his life and in terrible shape. Billie sang a chorus, two musicians played a chorus apiece, Billie sang another chorus, and so on...

'Lester Young wandered into view at the beginning of the second go-round. Someone had to give him a push in the back to get him on his feet and moving toward the microphone. You can see him lick his reed and settle the horn in his mouth. What he plays is one uncomplicated chorus of the blues that moves from phrase to phrase with a kind of otherworldly majesty. Sorrow, heartbreak, and what I can only call wisdom take place through the mechanism of following one note, usually a whole note, with another one, slowly. There he is, this stupendous musician who had once transformed everything about him by the grace of his genius, this present shambles, this human wreckage, hardly able to play at all, delivering a statement that becomes more and more perfect, more and more profound as it advances from step to step. I cried every time I watched it, and I watched it over and over. I played it for my friends and made them watch it. Eventually, I wondered: what could lead a person to a place like that, what brought him there? That was the origin of *Pork Pie Hat.*'

Straub's enthusiasm for jazz is well known (and I'd love to see his collection); there are references to jazz that run like veins through his body of work — even in The Talisman. (Koko, for example, is the name of a tune by Charlie Parker.) When I ask Straub what his favourite is of someone else's work, he answers: 'How about the Paul Desmond solo on "These Foolish Things" described in Mr X? Or Richard Strauss's "Metamorphosen"? But I suppose you mean a favourite book. The only valid way to answer that would be by saying, "My favourite Irish Murdoch novel is The Nice and the Good, my favourite Tolstoy novel is Anna Karenina, my favourite Dickens novel is Bleak House, my favourite John Ashbery poem is "The Skaters", and so on.' A different writer altogether, Anthony Burgess, used to say that the future of the novel depended on its fusion with classical music, but died before he could bring anything of the kind off. Would Peter Straub be able to see anything like that as being within the realms of possibility, replacing the word 'classical' with 'jazz'? 'Maybe Burgess was just trying to be outrageous,' is the answer, 'though of course he was deeply involved with music. But what could he have had in mind? "Ah, we have just received the manuscript of Mr Burgess's new novel. Let me give the first chapter to the violin section, so we can hear what it sounds like." I don't think anything I've ever written could be played on the tenor saxophone, but I have listened to so much jazz that I suppose a little must have rubbed off. I pay

MAGIC TERROR (7 TALES) Peter Straub

Random House hb, 352pp, US\$24.95 (July)
The most shocking fiction collection
in years creates a brilliant
kaleidoscope of psychological shadow
worlds.

The terrain of these extraordinary stories is marked by brutality, heartbreak, despair, wonder and an unexpected humour that allows empathy to flourish in the most unlikely circumstances.

'Bunny is Good Bread' enters the mind of a small boy being raised in grotesque circumstances and portrays the creation of a serial killer in a manner that compels pity, sorrow, comprehension, and a sense of grief as well as judgement. 'Hunger', narrated by the ghost of a pompous, self-pitying murderer, creates a profoundly beautiful vision of earthly life, one appreciated far more by the dead than the living. 'Mr Club and Mr Cuff', a masterpiece of black comedy, uses the material and structure of Melville's 'Bartleby the Scrivener' to create a revenge tale in which torture is a moral art and the revenger undergoes a transforming, albeit painful, education.

Also collected are 'Pork Pie Hat' (reviewed in TTA21), 'Ashputtle', 'Isn't it Romantic?' and 'The Ghost Village'.

attention to cadences and rhythms, to musical effects, but prose-music is very different from actual music. Long ago, some reviewer said that a couple of paragraphs I'd written "danced", but he did not say that you could dance to them.' For what it's worth, I agree: the architecture dances, not the reader.

For the author, next up, as you might have missed if you've been vacationing on another planet, Peter Straub will be working once more with Stephen King on the sequel to *The Talisman* — which might just usher in another movement in the former's career direction. As presumptuous as it might be to say so, I think we can reliably assume that a return to a more heavily-handed horror is on the cards. The idea of the sequel 'seemed too interesting to pass up,' Straub says. 'I had noticed that King's concerns and mine were converging in an unexpected way: Bag of Bones made use of Rebecca and Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener", both of which had been much on my mind, the former in Mr X and the latter as the basis for "Mr Clubb and Mr Cuff". When he asked about doing a sequel, we compared notes on how we saw the story going and discovered that our ideas matched perfectly. After that, the decision was an easy one. Besides that, I should say that King is a pleasure to work with and very agreeable company, extremely smart and very funny.' It was 'King [who] initially proposed that we do a sequel, and the first hints of the story were mutually suggested. It will not be called *Talisman 2*, because it'll be a novel, not a movie. We are working on a kind of Bible for the book right now. Once we start writing, I suppose we will send e-mail attachments back and forth. We're both looking forward to this with a great deal of pleasure.'

His opinion of the publishing scene at the moment is 'no doubt pretty much that of most other writers — do you have anything to drink, could we maybe go to a movie, is there any aspirin around here? Hey, all of a sudden I have this terrible headache, I think I'd better lie down for a while. We used to enjoy very pleasant weather in this part of the country, but now the only breaks we get from the blizzards are the occasional ice storms. When I tried to take a shower this morning, the pipes were frozen, and when I opened the New York Times, the big headline on the front page of the Business section read, "AOL/Warner/Putnam/Nike-Reebok/RJ Reynolds/ Citibank/Burger King Publishing Conglomerate Signs Di Caprio-Pitt-Paltrow Trio For 2-Book, \$550 Million Advance, Believed Largest Ever". Twenty-one years ago, in the interim between their acceptance and publication of my book Ghost Story, I went to the then-annual Christmas party held by the then-notable English publishing house of Jonathan Cape. A Cape editor I had not previously met came up to me and said, "Good for you, young man, you broke through with your fourth novel. That's rather unusual. We never expect that kind of thing to happen until the fifth novel." Try to imagine someone saying that today.'

But Peter Straub (thankfully, from the point of view of his readers) continues to produce excellent work, with the copyright credit going to something called the Seafront Corporation. The structure of which is as follows: 'The mighty Seafront Corporation somehow manages to sustain itself through the efforts of a single essential employee, who is proud to call himself its President and CEO. Should that guy ever resign and walk away, I don't know what would happen to the organization. We drudges, the little people, would have to scramble, I can tell you that for sure.'

And is it possible to describe an average working day? I ask — too unspecifically. 'Yes, of course! An average working day begins at 8 or 9AM, includes an hour for lunch, and ends at 5 or 6pm. Actual work takes up approximately a third of the day, not counting the lunch hour, and the remaining two-thirds are spent in meetings, gossip, flirtations, and checking out e-mail, favourite news groups and porn sites on the Internet. My working day is nothing like that at all. I arise at noon; attire myself in one of my legendary Saville Row chalk-stripe suits; go downstairs to feed the cats their Super Vitamin Enhanced Cod & Shrimp Gourmet Feast; enjoy a glass of skim milk and try to figure out if I am supposed to eat breakfast or lunch; pull something nondescript out of the refrigerator and eat it while fending off the cats, who have decided that although yesterday they thought the Cod & Shrimp Gourmet Feast was just the ticket, today they think it's crap, and what I am eating looks much, much tastier; trudge all the way upstairs to my office; turn on all the equipment; sit down at my desk; look at the computer; and bend over, clutching my head in my hands, and groan. The next few hours are spent in the coal mine. I may or may not go back downstairs to eat another nondescript something, depending on hunger. Around 6, I report again to the kitchen, not for a meal but a nice big glass filled with ice and a transparent liquid narcotic, which I greedily take back upstairs so that I can get in some more groaning. At 8 or thereabouts, I go down for dinner, and a couple of hours later remount the stairs, pick up my lantern and my pickaxe, and go back into the coalmine until after 3 in the morning, when I climb into bed.'

Peter Straub was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and is the author of fourteen novels, which have been translated into over twenty foreign languages. He has won the British Fantasy Award, the Bram Stoker Award, and two World Fantasy Awards. He lives in New York.



Lately, on Tuesdays, there was always a dead bird left on the sidewalk in front of one or another of the houses on Alberta's street. On Tuesdays after work Alberta went to the library to read newspapers. She would see them, the birds, on her walk. They worried her.

Tuesdays were Harley's day at the library, too. From the long, scarred wooden table behind periodicals, where he always took the last seat, closest to the window, Harley watched Alberta.

That particular Tuesday, a pearl-toned light fell over Harley sideways, bathing his hands and the atlas open before him in a clear, milk-water froth. The atlas lay open to a map of the Moluccas. He liked maps; current maps that told him where and how far and how many of what religion, that described terrain, division, possibility, despair; old ones which spoke of the world that had been, the shape of history like long dreams of a height and breadth so wide that the crush of armies, the intimacy of words whispered against skin, the empty sweep of a vast gorge, all had space within them. He liked the obscure maps and the fantastical maps, that described, in endless, skirling silence, the ground of a stranger's thought.

Harley worked the night shift at Amante's, making bread, danish, muffins and tarts. He liked the quiet emptiness of the tiles, the cool order of the empty tables when the bakery was closed. Sometimes, at the end of his shift, as the display cases were just beginning to reflect the early light coming in from the street, the owner would come, bringing huge bunches of day lilies, or fresh clematis. Tony Amante, a small, roundish man with a delicate black mustache, thinning hair and large, myopic brown eyes, would take two chairs down from one of the tables, sit with Harley, ask him how he was, did he think some cream scones might be good for tomorrow? Tony Amante would sit, run a hand over his head, and tell Harley about something his son or daughter had done, something that had happened to him that week. Harley said yes, what about some walnut cream scones? and yes, I guess children can be like that. He was reminded, at these times, of his father, and of the long rides he and his father had taken on his father's motorcylce when Harley was a little boy. He nodded to Tony Amante and watched the reflections in the glass cases and saw in them the flickering of a long landscape, his hair blowing across his eyes, his arms around his father and his father's strong, heavy hands on the throttle and clutch.

Tuesday nights Harley had off and he went to the library. After the library, he usually went to eat something which, if possible, matched the day's maps. Then he might see a movie, one with far places in it, or walk around the city. Maps, movies with far places in them, and watching Alberta, these were Harley's passions. Such was their intensity for him that they were sufficient to saturate the rest of the days in the week with their color, taste, texture, and isolate beauties.

Alberta had noticed Harley, and watched him, too, without ever being caught at it. She was practiced in not being caught at things: using her father's paints and reading her mother's journals, growing up; eating the last donut at work. She thought Harley too short, but occasionally, when the sun had warmed her to a more kindly disposition, she found some promise in the cast of his bones as they surfaced across his face and in the languid precision with which his fingers found out the secrets of the atlases he invariably studied. Alberta knew they were atlases because she had shadowed Harley several times down the corridors of books and gone to see what filled the shelves from which he chose volumes. She always slipped back to her chair before he returned to his table, or she reappeared from another direction.

Today Alberta waited. She alternated between reading an article on Chinese moths and worrying about the birds, but really she only waited. She had joined Harley, in his journeys — shadowed him enough to have some sense where he was now, on what continent, in what age. She was waiting for him to find her marker: a small square of creamy paper, stolen from her office, which she'd slipped between the pages of a map of the Russian Steppes. 'The Russian Circus is coming', it read, 'Alberta'.

At Alberta's house, the day of the circus, they sat on the porch and had iced coffee and kingcake. It was Saturday; Harley had asked Tony Amante for the night off.

"My mother sends it to me," Alberta said, explaining to Harley about the kingcake. "I usually take the cake to work and wait until everyone in the office has had some. But I still have three of them, the babies."

A moment later Harley pressed his fork over the baby's little plastic belly and unearthed it from the cake. "Oh," he said.

"They come in different colors," Alberta said. "People put other things in cakes, too; at weddings, sometimes a little silver ring, which means you'll be the next one to marry."

Blocks of shadow and water-clear light were laid up and down the street, through the trees, across other small, slightly dilapidated houses like the one Alberta rented. Her house shared a plot of land and the shade of a tall linden tree with another house, precisely like hers, but blue where hers was cinnamon colored. They sat catty-cornered to one another. On the porch of the blue house a wind chime spoke in the breeze. A man came out on the porch. They watched him pause, in the water-flow shadows, take out a pocket watch, consult it. He carried an old mail satchel over his shoulder; it looked heavy, oddly bulky. Harley wondered idly what he might have in it.

"That's my neighbor, Tom Grange." She waved. "Hi, Tom." Tom Grange closed his pocket watch and put it away. Standing very still, seeming to stare at nothing for a moment, Alberta's neighbor raised both arms out from his body, up to shoulder level, and slowly lowered them again. He did this three times. Then he waved to Alberta. As Tom Grange passed below the linden tree, a handful of sparrows startled from the branches like popped corn, chattering and darting low across the yard.

"Tom's a little strange," Alberta said.

Then she sighed and Harley searched for something to say.

"What does it mean — that I found the baby?"

"You have to buy the next cake."

"Oh."

"I think it only counts if you're in New Orleans."

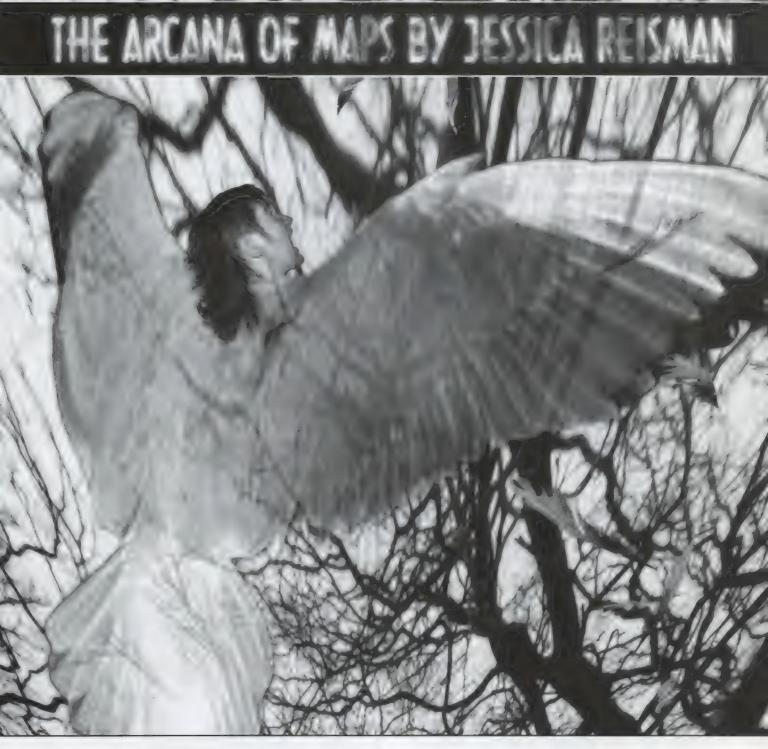
Harley cleaned the crumbs off the baby with his napkin and set it by Alberta's silver pitcher of iced coffee, which sweated in the warm air. "In Russia," he said, "there are ten main rivers; the Irtish empties into the Ob and the Ob empties into the Gulf of Ob."

Alberta laughed. She said, "I'd like to take the train through Russia."

"I'd like," Harley said, "to ride in a boat down the Volga."
"That would be nice." She picked up the baby and held it
up to her eye like a monocle.

Harley helped her clear up. A small oil painting hung on the kitchen wall and its colors drew his eyes: it depicted many animals of all kinds, a luminant earthly zoo in tiny, fine intensity of detail. He wandered past the painting, leaned awkwardly against a counter. The shadowed old kitchen and the worn wooden spaces of the house felt like Alberta, all around him.

The back door was open to a small, tangled backyard, overhung by bay trees. The song of some bird rose above the



swallows' thin cacophony and floated into the dim kitchen along with a heavy smell of grass.

Alberta looked up. "That's a song thrush. A mavis, they used to be called, old world thrush."

Looking out the back door, he found the bird, after a moment, on a low branch of the bay tree, brown and soft looking, with paler, spotted underside. "It's very small."

"Yes." Alberta put the silver pitcher in the refrigerator. "Small enough to escape attention."

Harley looked back at her curiously. "What do you mean?" She dried her hands and joined him in the doorway. "Someone's been leaving dead birds on people's front steps... arranging them, wings out, as if they were in flight. As if—almost as if they're trying to do some kind of," she waved her hand before her face, sketching what she tried to say on the air, "magic? Something—sympathetic magic, it's called."

They watched the thrush for a moment, cleaning its feathers.

"It is strange," Harley said. "Who did that painting?" He pointed to the wall.

Alberta looked. "My father. He was an ornithologist, but he was afraid of animals — mammals, the warm-blooded things. He always wanted to love them, but he was afraid."

Harley drove and Alberta navigated. Her car, an old yellow Volvo, had a dry, dusty feel of little use. The circus was on the outskirts of an end of the city unfamiliar to them both. Alberta bent from time to time over the map, tracing their route with a finger tip. She had large hands, a very fine, lucid skin, a somber sweetness in the arch of her eyebrows and long eyes. Otherwise she would fade, Alberta, in a group of people, in a crowd, unremarkable.

Over the streets and old warehouses that inhabited this section of town, the moon floated like a giant white necco wafer in a dusk sky lucent as thin china. The circus was out-

side, in the open air. Two trucks bearing the name *World Caravan* sat by the road, in a field between warehouses. Harley and Alberta found seats in the mini-bleachers. A small pond sat at the center of the bleachers, like an eye to the moon. Lights, a fluttering of long, painted cloths, and the bleachers themselves defined the performance circle. Trapeze riggings traced faint lines above them. More people came, the bleachers filled. They all sat in shadow, outside the circle. When the lights came up full, they were included, campers round a fire.

A group of performers carried a small boat into the circle. Tricked out with sails and mermaid prow, it recalled a much larger, three-masted ship. They set the boat on the water and from within it a sailor appeared, looking mournful, as if he'd been adrift for a hundred years, his lifetime passed in the lulls between waves.

Vibrant, anticipatory music charged the air. Other performers entered the circle. A trapeze artist flew through the air above them like an angel of blue and sinuous mercy. Spotlights strobed, a woman shook a metal sheet — storm and lightening lashed the ship, thunder rolled; the sailor was beached. He fought seven brothers who stood upon each other in pyramids and tall columns, leaping down around him like a rain of demons. Then he escaped on his ship and faced a god of the sea who tossed him in the air like a child.

Harley breathed a word. He felt as if the world had dipped and risen beneath him; a shiver went up his spine.

Alberta turned to look at him, at his face, shadowed in the veil of lights.

The lights flickered red and purple; a distant rumble shook the air, trembled on the water. A dragon appeared, towering over the sailor. Harley felt a hand pass over his heart. Alberta spoke softly beside him. "'The dragons, then, of memory, will be with us, always. Breathing fire in our blood, riding wickedly the air of our days.'"

The dragon was cloth and wood; human feet moved underneath, but real fire breathed out from the mouth of its heavy head. Roaring, the dragon flamed on the sailor and the sailor leapt aside.

The battle was enthusiastic. At one point the ship caught on fire — bits of sail and mast fell, burning, into the water; smoke rose up into the lights. Performers rushed out with a fire hose, splashing the audience and shorting out some of the lights. But the battle continued right through. When the smoke cleared the dragon lay with its great painted head on the sand, vanquished.

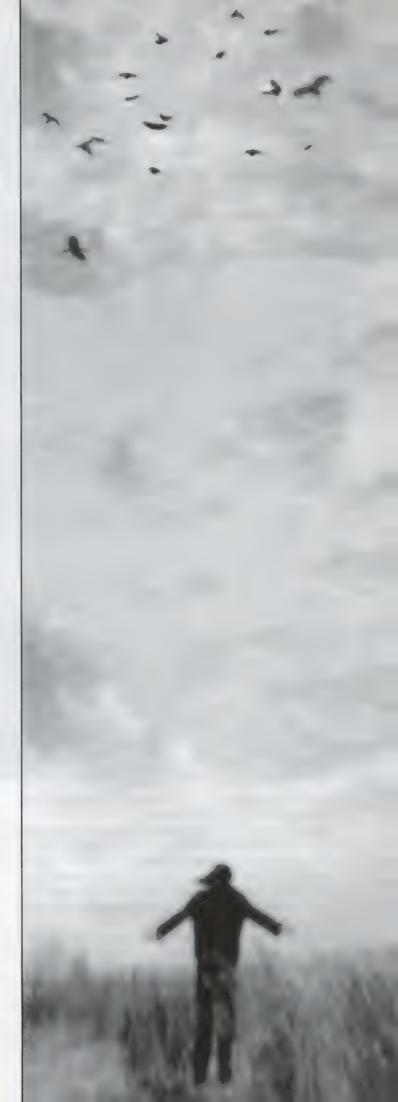
Now the sailor was confronted by his desires, in the shape of three furies: Fame, Fortune, Glory. Wearing ghostly rags which fluttered behind them, they rode into the circle atop three Volkswagen bugs harnessed like horses, careening and lurching around the sailor, who leapt and tumbled, all of them always just missing one another.

A small silence followed, the ring emptying out, the lights falling to a ghostly blue.

In the lull, Harley leaned toward Alberta. "What was that from? What you said?"

For a moment she did not answer. Harley watched one of her hands squeeze around the other. Then she leaned close, whispering back, "My mother wrote it, in one of her journals."

The sailor stood alone as two huge fans in the shadowed perimeter raised a wind around him. Death appeared, a contortionist in a mask, a rattle of bones, a swirl of storm and blackness. Behind Death came a coterie of animal familiars: a bear, two horses, and three dogs wearing red cowboy hats. Lead by Death, the animals took their turns in the measures of a dance. On the horses' backs rode revenants, vaulting through the air from one gleaming back to another.



When, finally, the sailor had lain down in the arms of Death, the darkness and the mask fell away and Death was revealed to be the angel of blue mercy.

Leaving the circus, they were quiet. The sky was dark as blackberry jam, the moon a round chip of bone high and far away. The air smelled of cement, heat, and fresh green from some field beyond the city.

Harley thought of his father, whom he remembered as a map of tattoos. On his father's left shoulder a dragon curled down, breathing fire over his heart. Other than the dragon, Harley only recalled isolated places in the topography that had been his father, a large man, his surface a sea of illusion.

When he and Alberta did begin to speak it was of the direction home, the city, the circus, and then, tentatively, of themselves.

The following Tuesday it rained, great gusts of warm, breezy drizzle. Harley and Alberta met outside the library. She wore a hooded blue raincoat; Harley carried an umbrella with two broken tines.

Inside, they left each other. Harley had gone on to Monaco. He was studying a map of the city and a guide to the casinos, along with figures on population, economic growth rates, and a book on the medieval history of the area. It pleased him to look up, as had been his furtive habit, and see Alberta.

Alberta sat over a book entitled The Method and Practice of Sympathetic Magics. It was an old cloth bound volume from which an musty, peppery smell rose. Opening the book, she discovered that herbs, small flowers, and weeds had been left between the pages. She fingered them softly. Paper thin, they crumbled easily, leaving a coarse powder on her fingers. That day, three more birds had turned up dead, a swallow, a tit mouse, and a mourning dove. Which made a total of fifteen that Alberta knew about. She scanned the chapters. There was nothing about birds, except for the use of feathers found on the ground, and nothing about death at all, really. It was all very gentle and polite, an ethical guide to the uses of minor, rather diversionary manipulations of the environment. One ominous phrase caught her eye, 'transformation requires sacrifice', but it was all about self-sacrifice and the tending of the tree of the soul, a subject, she thought, yet more obscure and untenable than the one she was pursuing. Closing the book, Alberta sat with it in her lap for a while, her mouth turned down around unfinished lines of thought.

When Harley next looked up, she was not there. He found her by the tall glass doors of the library entrance, standing in the gray, matte, rain-light. Harley, seeing how she had her hands tucked into the pockets of her jeans and was frowning over some thought, felt a turning in his bones, a little like that curving that had lifted and turned his bones when his father had cast them, on the motorcycle, into a long seventy mile-per-hour turn on some road sloping out of the trees and into the sight of an unexpected town.

They went to Lucky's, a diner near the library, set between a video store and a travel agent. Harley ate there sometimes, when the day's maps had not inspired him toward any particular cuisine and the inspiration for his food choice came only from his own life, the long trail of towns nested into the mountains and wide middle spaces of America, each town with its diners. Motel diners, downtown diners, diners perched over thin, roistering rivers where he ate a fried egg sandwich, or the special plate, and sometimes a piece of coconut cream pie while his father drank coffee and smoked cigarettes, talking in his long, gravel-bottomed voice to the waitstaff. Diners gone into sleepy, off the back of his father's bike, the road

still thrumming deep in the mysterious, permeable matter of his ten year old bones.

Each table in Lucky's had some novelty item. Several had the little individual juke boxes that played three songs for a quarter; one had a miniature game of fuz ball, another a painted, glassed in box with a curtained stage inside it and a slot for fifty cents. MARRIONETTE SHOW WAS painted in dark red letters across the top.

The table they sat at had a napkin dispenser which told fortunes for a nickle. There was a picture of a man in a turban, Mr Destiny. Neither Harley nor Alberta had a nickle, so Mr Destiny told them nothing and instead sat between them, a repository of free napkins and inaccessible wisdom.

At one point in their conversation, watching Harley salt his hamburger, Alberta thought again of the birds. It was, she decided, that much about Harley reminded her of birds. The length of his fingers, the lift of his hands when he spoke, a certain grace and hovering in his approach to things, his eyes, which had the soft, brown iridescence of a thrush's feathers and were winged by long lashes. Vaguely distraught by this contemplation, Alberta sipped her coffee and dropped her eyes. She thought then about writing a fortune on a small slip of paper to put in a cookie or a napkin dispenser. *Transformation requires sacrifice*.

In her house that night, after she had showered and laid out her work clothes for the morning, Alberta pulled down a box from a high shelf in the hall closet. She put the box on the kitchen table and dug around in it until she found what she wanted. One of her mother's journals and an old stack of cassette tapes of her father's. The cassettes were labeled: mavis, cardinal, meadow lark, whippoorwill, kingfisher, bobolink, mockingbird, blackbird, with a tiny, precise drawing of each bird beside its name. Her mother had given her the tapes after her father died. She'd stolen the journal, since her mother was still alive.

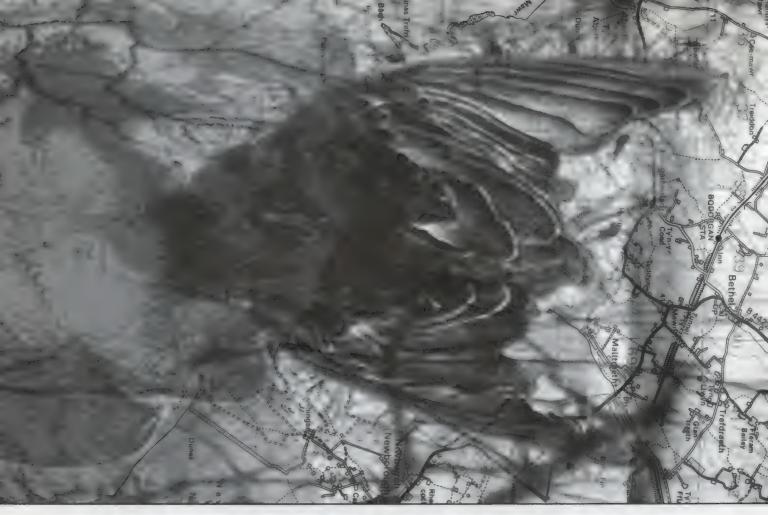
The tapes were musty and brittle, things her father had used in school. Alberta put one into the portable cassette radio she kept in the kitchen. The song of a blackbird rose out of the box, through the kitchen. After a moment, she opened her mother's journal, randomly, and began reading.

There was something, it seemed to her, that she needed to understand, needed to, or her days might slowly become impressionless, toneless, depthless. She sat reading the journal, listening to the bird song on the tapes in the dim kitchen. The night brushed against the open window by the table, soft air through the trees and bushes. An hour had passed and the bobolink was playing when she looked up from the journal, having come upon the poem about dragons from which she'd quoted to Harley.

She looked up and into her neighbor Tom's bedroom, which was opposite her kitchen. Her thoughts were unfocused, but thick and resonant, like a series of low notes on a cello. Then she saw Tom Grange.

Across the small space of grass that separated the houses, he stood in his bedroom, his window open. He stood in profile to her, wearing nothing. His lips moved around some words. Slowly, he raised his arms out from his sides. His hands were filled with something dark; feathers, she realized, as they fluttered into the air and then slowly down from his upflung hands.

As she watched, Tom's arms stretched, then shrank and thinned, darkening and curving into a new shape. His head, body and legs all contracted, darkening, then thrusting suddenly and definitively into a feathered body, white tipped wings, and beaked, dark-eyed head.



A bird rose with a lift of wings in Tom Grange's bedroom and flew out the window. Alberta heard a light rushing sound of wings and the bird was gone.

The next day, Harley came by in the afternoon and found Alberta sitting on her front step, contemplating a small dark thing on the walk before her. Harley saw it was the thrush.

"I found it this morning," Alberta said. "But I had to leave, I was late for work." She wore a pale blouse and skirt, a medallion on a chain. "It's the last one, I think; today's not Tuesday."

Harley didn't know what this meant, but he let it pass. He sat down on the step below Alberta and considered. The bird's wings were outstretched, a tiny arrow stuck out of its body, fletched in bright colors of ribbon.

"Let's take it away," she said suddenly. "Out of town, and bury it." She was asking him, so Harley nodded.

"You have your map?" he asked. "Pick a place, and we can drive out there. Right now, if you want."

"Yes." But she sat for a while more, just staring at the bird. Then she went in. Harley examined the bird, trying to decide what was meant by it, what sort of symbol the bird was, in what sort of world; where it was someone hoped to get to by marking the paths of the neighborhood with dead birds.

Alberta came back with the map, a cardboard box, a shovel, and an old grocery bag. The box reminded Harley of his first pets, two white mice, who had lived for a year and then been buried in a shoe box. Alberta put the bird in the box and spread the map out on the ground. "Here," she said, pointing. It was out past where the circus had been, where the map sloughed off into unmarked spaces wound through by uncrossed roads.

A humid wind sifted through the linden tree and Alberta looked up into it as if searching for something. Then she turned and looked at her neighbor's blue house.

"I'll be right back." With the grocery bag under one arm,

she went over to Tom Grange's house and up on the porch. She stood for a moment, then pushed open the door and disappeared inside.

Harley watched the porch and waited. Several minutes passed. The wind chime on Tom Grange's porch echoed into the afternoon's lucid, empty heat and sweat dripped down Harley's sides from his armpits. The air smelled of baked sidewalk, hot grass, dust.

Several minutes later, Alberta emerged. She held the grocery bag in one hand, the open end folded closed. When she got to Harley, she unfolded it and showed him what was in the bag: a mass of feathers, soft brown and glossy black, red and blue and pearly gray.

They encountered more traffic than either of them expected, Harley not owning a car and Alberta never driving hers. Lines of cars caught them up, creeping along under the heavy sky, through the air that was like a fall of warm breath on the skin.

Harley didn't realize that he'd taken a wrong turn, not for a while. When he noticed the wrong feeling of the roads and the direction of the dimming, cloud-drowned sun, he was slow to say anything. Alberta knew, he could see, that they were not in the proper place; but she held the map crumpled in her fists and did not look at it. She was as far away from him as she could get, crushed up by the door, eyes focused into places beyond the old buildings and the faces drifting behind windshields.

Harley's fingers trembled on the steering wheel. He laid the map out in his mind, to follow it through the deep, brickand-overpass girded streets. He felt all turned around, facing wrong ways in his body and half-again another wrong way in his heart. Other maps tended to lay themselves through his mind, ghostlike, over the one he needed.

The city was anywhere, everywhere, places that had been and ones that didn't exist.

They drove for a long time. The streets resisted them, oneways and twenty minutes at a time on no-access stretches.

At first when Alberta began to talk, Harley wasn't listening.

"I went to a wedding once; my cousin Janie's. I drank too much because I didn't know anyone; my cousin and I weren't close. My mother wouldn't go because she never liked my father's family and after he died she figured she didn't have to pretend. So I was drunk and I didn't know anyone. And they had this big cake that had a layer specially made just for the single women — which was mostly the bridesmaids and a few of Janie's other friends. And me, because I was too drunk to disappear in time.

"The reason that layer of cake was for the single women was that it had a little silver ring in it somewhere. And I got the ring. I stood in that circle of women, with the other guests all around us, some of the men whooping and calling. I felt the ring in my mouth and I kept it there. I hid it in my cheek. It was a little thing, heavy silver, too small even for my pinky. It would fit a child, maybe. I kept it there and I didn't say anything. That any of those people would feel they had to whoop and congratulate at me — "Her voice had gotten very quiet, so quiet Harley had almost ceased to breath. He drew a breath now, just as Alberta did, sighing.

"I couldn't bear it...it was too bad, I guess. You could see that some of the bridesmaids would have liked to get it — to have the little ring and get all the attention."

They were among warehouses now; had shed other cars while the sky was shedding the gray afternoon. Between the hulking, shadowed warehouses, they could see a thin line of light along the sky, the sun at the edge of the world.

"That's the ring," Alberta said, "on the chain holding the

Harley found it with his fingers. Thick and cool, a smooth band with worked, twisted borders.

"So strange," Alberta said, almost to herself, but no longer so far away. She smoothed and refolded the map, put it between the seats.

They passed the field where the circus had been and it was gone, the circus, in the utter way of summers and memories you can no longer touch. Then they turned out onto an old road that seemed to climb up along the ridge of the world. The warehouses dropped away and unused, scraggly fields opened out around them, bordered by dark fringings of trees. In the gold, oil paint light beneath the darkened clouds, the green of the fields was ethereal, a fragile vapor across the earth; sweetness cooled the air above.

They stopped the car at a quiet turn off on the edge of a field. Harley dug a small hole and Alberta placed the box in it. She crouched beside the hole and watched as Harley filled in the grave and covered over the white box with the dark, mineral-smelling earth. She patted the ground over it, a small bald spot in the foxtail and cow grass. Then she stood and looked at Harley.

"Do you believe in transformation, Harley?"

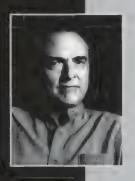
"Transformation?" He slid a slow look along the horizon and down to the ground, to the fresh grave and the low, gold light around them. "Yes," he said then. "I suppose I do."

Alberta came close to Harley; she stood beside him and felt the warmth between them, that was deeper than the heat of the day. Harley's hand brushed light and firm as a wing across her shoulders. They stood beside one another and watched a hawk spin figures in the falling dark. Then they got into the car and drove back out to the road.

Alberta opened the window so that her hair whipped out into the air. On the back seat were the shovel and the bag of feathers. She took a handful of soft, prickle-tipped feathers from the bag and released them onto the wind. The feathers trickled back, a dark trail in the air that Alberta and Harley would not follow home.

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Have you noticed how we're living in a shorthand world?

It manifests itself in a whole horde of things: like the infuriating (to me) desire on the part of many escribblers to dot around their missives curious acronyms bordered at the front by the < sign and at the back by a >. It took me quite a while to figure out some of these but I got a head start with the excessive use of < g > , usually before or after something that the writer considered either (a) funny but not *so* funny that he or she didn't need to instruct us accordingly, or (b) a bit of a dig at the recipient and so in need of a little message to let said recipient know that the gist of that portion of the note should not be taken *too* literally.

The <g> translates to 'grin'...as in, 'Hey, I'm grinning here!' or, more pointedly, 'I know what I just wrote may sound a little pompous but it's actually meant tongue-in-cheek'. And I suppose that's fair enough. We all know the limitations of the written word as compared with actual conversation, when a whole host of communicative devices – intonation, physical mannerisms, and even a chuckle – come into play to support and complement the words and phrases themselves.

But, of course, it's never long before one thing no longer suffices and one sees (or invents) the need to create new acronyms: I've since come across < lol > for 'laughing out loud' – as in, presumably, 'Hey, I'm sitting here writing you a note and it's just so darned funny I'm actually laughing out loud!' – and < lmao > . This last one caused me a lot of concern. In the end, unable to deduce its sub-text, I asked a friend of mine (who spends far too much time staring goggle-eyed at chat-room banter) to translate.

"Why," he told me, unable to keep the incredulity out of his voice, "it means 'laughing my ass off'!"

Now why is it I never thought of that...particularly when it's so obvious.

'Hey, I'm having so much fun sitting here writing to you that it's causing parts of my anatomy to disengage themselves and tumble to the floor'...or words to that effect. Makes you wonder how we ever managed to get through writing letters (those pieces of paper we wrote on and then inserted into envelopes etc) without such helpful little decorations to amplify our comments.

Me, I blame it all on Tommy Handley.

After all, it was Handley who, in 1938, decided to cash in on the then in-vogue rash of 'initial' words (as they were known – like ARP, RAF, WVS and so on) and come up with a new title for his weekly 'It's That Man Again' radio show...something that wallowed in the same degree of pomposity and self-importance.

OOT, for 'Office of Twerps', was briefly considered

but quickly dropped and Handley recognised that little could be done with his own initials. It was only when doodling with the *existing* name of the show that Handley realised the title was already there...and so it was that 'It's That Man Again' became the ITMA Show.

And that was the thin end of the wedge, the start of an overwhelming urge to reduce things to their absolute basic essential, to trim off anything that no longer seemed *necessary*.

Just over two decades later, radio – or 'the wireless' as it was more affectionately known in British homes of the time – was being slowly but surely overtaken by television, while the children's textonly weekly papers (such as *Wizard* and *Hotspur* and so on) were being stomped into submission by their cartoon-only counterparts. Up to then, it had been deemed that there was space and interest aplenty for them both to continue...but tastes change and attention-spans – not to mention available reading time – dwindled.

Thus, Wizard and Hotspur faded into that Valhalla of children's weekly papers already populated by Tiger Tim's Weekly and the much-loved and -revered Magnet and Gem schoolboy romps...to be joined, eventually, by Film Fun and Radio Fun.

Pretty soon, of course, the slow rot spread to actual books. The classic adventure yarns of yore were the first to suffer, banished into a hazy afterlife that itself eventually dwindled to something approaching myth. *Robin Hood*, for instance, and Dickens's work, and tales of skullduggery such as *Treasure Island*... even such staples of the genres of fantastical fiction as *Doctor Jeckyl and Mister Hyde* and *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds* suffered an ignominious defeat at the hands of new, brash and less demanding upstarts and, as a consequence, disappeared from the scene entirely (with the possible exception of their appearance as illustrated and often hopelessly abridged editions in the *Classics Illustrated* series).

All of these, once regarded as the domain – if not quite the staple – of childhood entertainment, became *passe...*rendered hopelessly out of date.

Television, movies, and the slow change of comicbooks from being items purely of entertainment into something akin to relevence (the most notable example, perhaps, being Oliver 'Green Arrow' Queen's discovery that his young ward, the appropriately named – as it turned out – 'Speedy', had hooked onto mainlining drugs) were the vanguard, followed by video games, video itself and the burgeoning habit of the film and TV industries 'adapting' (and I use the term as loosely as some of the questionable results) wonderful prose into generally less-than-

wonderful visual excess. How many, I wonder, of the upcoming generations will ever bother to read Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* trilogy now that the BBC has butchered it (albeit entertainingly) into a painfully truncated four-part mini-series? The same is already true, of course, for Stoker's *Dracula*, Shelley's *Frankenstein* and probably thousands of others.

The bottom line is that we now consider time to be in such short supply – despite the paradoxical fact that we live longer than our counterparts of, say, fifty years ago – that we don't need the full thing, we just need a precis. Or, as Jack Webb's Sergeant Joe Friday used to say in TV's *Dragnet*, 'Just give me the facts, ma'am.'

Well, the facts are neatly encapsulated in this little gem of wonder...which for many, myself included, is tantamount to a mini horror story:

A recent contestant on the Chris Tarrant-hosted quiz show designed to create instant TV millionaires was asked which type of writing Ray Bradbury is famous for. The question was multiple-choice – four categories: travel, biographies, science fiction and crime – but, even after enlisting the help of one of his so-called 'experts', the contestant failed to get the correct answer.

Now, I'm not being elitist here. It could have been Stephen King or Raymond Chandler or PG Wodehouse or any from the endless list of authors who have made their reputations primarily in one field of writing. Because, let's face it, we're not talking about some little-known scribbler with a few stories to his or her name, all of which were published before WWII; we're talking about someone who, along with maybe a dozen other equally literary lights spearheaded the field of science fiction.

And he's only the latest of a long line.

I recall visiting with John Brunner in 1994 – the year before he died – and listening with amazement to his sorry tale of publishing woe. It turned out that, at the time – I don't know if the situation has been extensively remedied though Gollancz has re-issued Stand on Zanzibar – none of Brunner's books were currently in print, either here in the UK or in the United States. The situation clearly angered Brunner, but this didn't come across anywhere near as much as a deep and somewhat embittered sadness that, after many years and much excellent work, he was no longer considered relevent.

Similarly, I imagine that, if you called at your local Borders or Waterstones, you'd be hard put to pick up any of AE Van Vogt's books...which means that new readers can't enjoy the delights of *Slan* or *The Voyage of the Space Beagle* or *The Weapon Shops of Isher*, though maybe the fact that Van Vogt died a couple of months ago might prompt some enterprising publisher to add such masterpieces to their lists.

And if you're a fan of horror, try finding Arthur Machen's books – and, yes, I know there's a Machen Society and folks such as the wonderful Tartarus and Ash Tree presses are making such seminal works available again in beautifully produced limited editions...but try walking into a store and finding such stuff in the horror section. It's hard enough tracking down Ramsey Campbell's work. And we're talking only of *existing* work, not new stuff. Hence Campbell still hasn't – to my knowledge – found a

UK publisher, and Jonathan Aycliffe's new novel *The Talisman* has had to rely on good old Ash Tree to find an outlet.

Sell-by dates now apply not only to perishables but to literature, too...and to writers.

If it's 'old' then popular opinion seems to have it that it must be 'old hat', too. And as we – and that's the readers, the publishers and the bookstores – turn our backs on writers, those same writers fade away.

And it's this, coupled with the fact that so many other things now vie for the punter's time, energy and disposable income, that has resulted in two people – *out of two*, remember – not knowing what type of writing Ray Bradbury is renowned for. Of course, Bradbury hasn't yet faded from the public consciousness – I hope he won't for a very long time to come – and one would like to think that the would-be millionaire on Chris Tarrant's show is not representative of the *status quo*.

But maybe that's not the case.

Maybe the situation is like this: the shorthand is spreading throughout Society, its arcane acronyms first removing words and then phrases, to be followed by entire stories and, finally, by the writers who created them. The new regime of three- and four-letter non-words, and strange communicative hybrids are making it difficult for 21st Century humanity to understand the Good Old Stuff, let alone derive any pleasure from it.

But all is not yet lost.

Aside from myself and all the others who regularly acknowledge the immense contribution made by the literary pioneers, there are those who stoically refuse to allow that work ever to be far from the public's eye.

Two cases in point being the Gollancz Masterworks series – which I've already mentioned, but such a creditable endeavour cannot be mentioned too often – and Earthlight's recent publication of Bradbury's *The Halloween Tree*, the latest in a line of re-issues of some of the author's finest works.

Essentially – or at least, ostensibly – a book for young adults, *The Halloween Tree* is vintage Bradbury. It's a book redolent of imagery, with the action – whilst taking a rightful place at centre-stage – sharing its prominence with the less cerebral senses (if 'appreciation of action' can indeed be deemed a sense). In *The Halloween Tree* – as in all of Bradbury's work – you can smell the night air, hear the October wind and the lonesome barking coming from one of the yards down the street, and you can feel the spring of the grass beneath your feet.

The story, in a nutshell, is the discovery, by a gang of smalltown boys one All Hallows Eve, of the many secrets of the pagan festival. It's short, beautiful and wondrous. I urge you to check it out...and at the same time, you might check out the titles in Gollancz's SF Masterworks series and their forthcoming Fantasy Masterworks. Much of this stuff has been around for decades – some of it for more than 50 years – but don't be fooled into thinking it'll stay around forever.

TTFN.

Pete Crowther

The Halloween Tree by Ray Bradbury is published by Earthlight as an A format paperback priced £5.99 They met him at the main railway station and cheerily put his things in the estate car. Their morose seventeen-year-old daughter was with them; he could not guess why. Only much later did he think to ask himself why she had been there that day. Nevertheless, during the journey to his new lodgings he already felt pampered by their attentions.

Such was their interest, which seemed genuine, that he hardly looked at the landscape. The greenness of landscape bored him, though on this occasion he might have taken notice. It was rather another green that held his attention, that of Miranda's eyes in the rear-view, which wandered from the surface of the mirror to the road in front and finally sideways to her husband, the quieter of the two. Yet there would have been nothing so remarkable about this interplay had he not felt the closeness of that mirror, the projection of the plane unusually towards him.

They were delicate in their questioning. He felt his earlier resolve to hold back weakening, but before he gave in he managed to divert the conversation away to generalities about the city and their village.

The house was a converted farmhouse. On the way in they pointed to the separate entrance door to his flat at the side. This door, he was told, led up a set of stairs to the first floor where he had his own kitchen and room. But he didn't want to see that straightaway, surely.

He was guided to a sofa where he was told to relax while they prepared the food. He could not stay still for long. Noticing this, they encouraged him to look around.

The walls were mostly pastel colours, decorated sparsely but tastefully with a framed ordinance map of the local area, a Persian rug, and a number of photos. All of these were modest in their positioning and colour scheme; even the rug was placed so as to be in permanent shadow, he calculated from the angle of the falling sun. There would have been nothing unusual about this had he not suddenly realized that at the centre of the back wall, where most of these objects were, was an oil painting which he had inexplicably failed to see till now. He gave the picture all the greater attention as a result.

The picture showed a slender pale naked woman standing in a dark thicket of jungle. He could not have dated it; he knew very little about such things, but it must have been very old because of the intricate network of cracks. He was almost at as much of a loss when it came to explaining why it captivated him so much. Then the obvious occurred to him. The woman bore a marked similarity to Miranda, especially in her wide, staring eyes, except that the painted woman's eyes were blue.

He felt Michael's presence behind him before it was confirmed by his words. "You like it?"

"Yes. Did vou do it?"

"Heavens, no. We found it in a junk shop. It..."

"Looks so much like Miranda?"

"Yes, you're sharp. I really don't know much about this kind of thing. Miranda does, though."

"You think," came Miranda's interjection from the kitchen. Under his breath, and guiding Paul back to the sofa, Michael added, "She's modest. That's all."

"Food's nearly ready," she said as if to confirm his claim. With a knowing smile Michael jumped up and went back into the kitchen.

He was tired. The sun was now hiding behind a distant hillock he could see through the window. With no lights yet turned on, the darkness seeped into the room like a dye, and objects began to congregate around him, irrespective of their weight or the fixtures that held them to surfaces. A murmur of voices circled him, then whorled upwards into a distant place.

In his dream Hana placed her arms around him, and her



breasts supported his head. He reached up for her but grasped at space. He fell, the loss magnified by the distance, which, like the combined speeds of two crashing cars, shortened itself by coming towards him as quickly as he was going to it.

The clink of glasses must have woken him. When he turned around he saw the three of them smiling. They looked like a family for the first time. Their plates were empty, their wine glasses were half-full. Miranda said, "I'm sorry, we tried to wake you but you were too far gone."

"How long have I been sleeping?"

"Oh, just half an hour. The food's still hot."

The rest of that evening was taken up with pleasantries. They only discussed a few items concerning his flat when they finally showed him what was to be his home for the foreseeable near future.

They entered his place through a connecting door which went through his bathroom into a small kitchen. There was a key, but as if to reassure him, Miranda said, "Don't worry, no one'll come through, only to bring in the washing."

The place itself was small, with rudimentary furniture, a scattering of prints and antiques, small concessions, rather than tokens, he judged, to their confidence in him as a safe tenant, something in no small part due to the recommendation he was sure his new employer had given. He had everything he needed, as far as he could see. There was even a balcony with a cityscape made up of pinpricks of light. He was amazed that this far out they could see the city at all.

He wasn't sure if the door worried him or not. It certainly modified the description of 'self-contained flat' somewhat, but the occasional interruptions would surely be made up for.

The city could have been any large city in Europe that had trams. Avoiding the quicker but harrowing train ride, he took a bus for twenty minutes, then caught the tram into work.

Usually he got a seat but would vacate it for an old person. At first he had resented it; the old people were resentful shadow people whose excess of number and presence, weighted down with years and buried thoughts, threatened to swallow him up. Not much later, when he heard of the death of a friend the same age as him, he began to look upon them differently. We fear them, he thought, because they are the shells of our own frailties and dreads; they fear us because they can see how empty we are, and yet they fear for us too because we are not bound by this weight of the past.

He developed two lives, and worked on them with equal attention. His city life was partly characterized by randomness. He would sometimes take a bus or tram without bothering to look at the number or destination; only this way could he discover something new. The city was a brain; it even had a left and a right side, and it was his task to map its paths and neural networks. Sometimes, despite these ministrations, he would find himself standing on a corner, his own mind completely unaware of what he was doing in this place. Sometimes he even forgot what his job was.

His second life, which took place in his flat in the country, was less predictable. There was really no connection with the city. It was necessary to invest it with a sense of mystery, to make it a puzzle, and because of his nature and his particular situation, this was not difficult. Reinforcing this separation was his own past; what he had been, where and with whom, these were cemented to the city half of him, and they were external to the man of twenty-nine who went up the stairs of his flat and was sometimes chanced upon by his affable landlady or landlord, though seldom by their daughter.

Contrary to his initial misgivings, none of the family came through the connecting door without first knocking, and even these visits were limited to essential things, which after the first few weeks had been sorted out. Without complaint, Miranda got used to the frequency of the washing he gave her to do, necessitated by the paltriness of his clothing.

He was perhaps a little concerned with the distance the family had shown since that first evening he had moved in. In the course of the following months he had gone from wanting to maintain his privacy to feeling a need for some contact. He was relieved, therefore, when Michael tapped lightly on his door one Friday evening and invited him to eat with them.

The room had been rearranged somewhat, so that the longer side of the dining table ran along the back wall where the painting was hung. While Miranda passed the food to Michael through a serving hatch, Paul noticed the painting again, slightly to the left of the chair, which was in the dead centre of the wall. Pippa breezed into the room and took her seat just as Michael was passing around the food. Michael sat on Paul's right, and Miranda eventually came through and sat opposite Paul in the chair in front of the picture so that her image seemed ghosted by that of the naked figure.

The customary platitudes were indulged in, the kinds of non-topics he had succeeded in escaping from for some time. Now he was reconciled to the fact that such a development was inevitable. But he did not anticipate the acuity with which conversation and incidental detail would be directed at him, and from him to them. Miranda had a perpetual look of amusement on her face when she spoke to him and this unnerved him a little, but it seemed the correct counterweight to Michael's self-absorption, and Pippa's fixed scowl.

"We still know hardly anything about you, Paul," Miranda said, pausing. Then, "I hope you don't mind my asking."

"No, not at all." He had to think quickly here. It was the way with him that he could not successfully hide facts; even

explaining the simplest embarrassing personal tick of his became a complexly involved circumlocution that in the end revealed whatever he was attempting to mask.

"Well, there's not much to say, really. I've been living abroad for years, mostly teaching, and I'm divorced."

"Just that?" Miranda's amusement was a dance on a thin surface of ice, he saw now for the first time. "I'm sure you're just being modest about yourself. You can't say that about everyone."

Paul thought he caught a quick, electric exchange of glances between her and Michael, but he wasn't certain. "Of course, people have to keep *some* things to themselves," she added.

The last of these words coincided with Michael's hand reaching out for the wine bottle and knocking over his own glass. The redness shot across the tablecloth like successive explosions, one nested within the other.

"Oh, Michael!"

"I'm sorry, darling."

No one said anything while Miranda went out quickly for a cloth.

"Well, I've had enough, anyway," he said, and burst out laughing as she returned.

The bleak attempt at a joke fell on a flat wall of silence.

"Well, I haven't. And I'm not the one spilling things!"

She stared at Paul as if for support. He realized that she had already had four glasses, and her speech was slightly slurred. He could not decide how far her chiding was serious and how far it was her playing with Michael's outward show of calm.

Pippa had said nothing since she had sat down, and now got up and went off without a word. There was no precedent in his mind for it, but Paul felt as if a strip of his skin were being flayed off as she left.

But why should he worry? He could not see himself being invited back for a long time. He felt suddenly desperate to change the subject, though he was not absolutely sure that the subject had ever been declared.

He focused on the painting behind Miranda, on the strangely blue leaves and those enormous eyes. "That really is an amazing picture you have," he finally said.

Michael stood up and started to clear away the plates.

"Yes, we bought it years ago when we were students. I'm sure it's a Rousseau, but Michael won't even let me get it valued."

"It's got sentimental value," Michael retorted as he went into the kitchen.

"Yes," she said, laughing at something that must have been an old source of tension between them. "He always says she reminds him of me."

"Well, that's what I thought the minute I saw it," Paul concurred.

"Really, isn't there a discrepancy there? Have a closer look. Come round."

He walked around the table and stood in the small space between her and the painting. In the background he could hear Michael washing and scraping away at the dishes as if he wanted to remove more than just food.

As he studied the figure close up, he became aware of Miranda's hand lightly touching his arm, where it stayed. He tried to concentrate on the painting, exploring for a while the divaricate veins on the woman's breasts, but this told him nothing.

"It's a disease," she said, baffling him for a moment. "They were originally green, like mine." She laughed. "The green was made from yellow and blue. The yellow oxidized, leaving blue. If it weren't a night scene, you'd notice it more in the foliage." She said all this with a kind of Fitzgeraldian melan-

choly he hadn't noticed in her before.

Michael came back in, and she moved her hand away. "That's your theory, anyway."

That night his thoughts turned to the connecting door beyond the kitchen: he saw it now as a rectangle blacker than the surrounding darkness. Whereas before it had come to be a way through, a kind of unacknowledged comfort, it was now a plate shifting against the surface of his thoughts, of his isolation, alternately opening or slipping away. Nameless desires

lation, alternately opening or slipping away. Nameless desires arose, and he was transported beyond himself. At the height of these a form appeared.

Pippa was standing by the bed. He hadn't heard a sound, and her earlier timidity made it all the more unreasonable.

She was so much like her mother. The whole thing made no

Pippa was standing by the bed. He hadn't heard a sound, and her earlier timidity made it all the more unreasonable. She was so much like her mother. The whole thing made no sense. The darkness of the background pushed her towards him, making her dizzyingly three-dimensional. Then he noticed her belly. She lowered herself onto the end of the bed, sitting astride his extended feet. She gave birth to the baby there and then; Miranda came in when the baby's cries echoed out for the first time.

He climbed the hill and looked at the surrounding countryside, gaining an overall view for the first time. In the distance the hedgerows of the fields ran into each other like braids of hair, dipping, disappearing and emerging as if through gaps in space. He did not adhere to a Romantic view of the country, nor did he ascribe to it some ill-defined therapeutic properties. Perhaps this was why he was all the more exhilarated, standing up here now. Hana was falling back into the distance, and he was being forced onto a ledge of reason.

"She meant a lot, didn't she?"

How long he had been there he couldn't say, but the voice, and, even more, the words it carried, was solid enough almost to push him down the hill.

"Miranda." Then, "It really looks that obvious?"

"'Fraid so," she quipped, then, performing a small caricole, as if suddenly taken by girlish precocity, turned back and held his hand.

He trembled, but let himself be guided over to some rocks where they sat down. She pulled his head towards her and let it rest against her shoulder for some time without either of them saying a word.

They were facing the town. The house was slightly off to the right. From where they were they could see Michael digging the garden as Pippa emerged from the house and handed something to him. The setting sun behind the house spilled a river of ochre onto the brown roof and compounded the grass into a deeper shade. A thin arm, barely defined, reached out a caress, and for a moment the action seemed to be returned.

"When we met, Michael was always full of plans. He had ambitions to work in the theatre, he was always quoting Shakespeare, but it was never corny. We were in London in those days. He never looked at another woman. Then we had Pippa. We got offers to teach, so we settled down here."

She said all this with the measured contemplation of someone speaking of a long-past bereavement, her hand playing hopscotch with the gaps between his fingers.

"It was perfect for a while."

He couldn't understand what she was driving at, but he dreaded some revelation. He prayed she would hold back.

"What about you? You've hardly told us anything."

"There's really nothing to tell. There's no mystery. We made the decision together."

She tightened her grip and drew closer. He could almost imagine her twenty years before. She must have been irresistible.

Prettier even than Pippa. Only a certain sadness interfered. He was aware of her thin, unsupported breasts touching his arm. Their embrace was awkward, as if they were attempting to detach impeding straps or harnesses from each other which had become entangled. He didn't want it to be like this, but he really didn't know what he wanted. They slid down onto the earth and rolled against each other, their momentum almost taking them down the slope.

They woke in the dark. For a moment he thought he was in his own bed in the house, but mutual, confirming forays quickly disabused him. He did not know what he felt.

That evening he locked the connecting door, leaving the key angled so that it could not be dislodged even if they had another. What was he afraid of? That he would make that journey or she? They were loud that night, but he could not say whether they were having a particularly engaged discussion or an argument. Pippa was more vocal than usual, certainly; on the few occasions he had heard her like this, he had never been able to tell if she was crying or simply raising her voice to make a point.

He put on headphones and immersed himself in a novel but found himself re-reading each page till he gave up, finally falling asleep. When he awoke, it was two o'clock. He was not quite sure if he had woken from a dream or heard a banging noise. Either way, he now had to empty his bladder.

The toilet was next to the bathroom. As he approached it he noticed a dull strip of light under the connecting door. More than this, he heard a moaning, followed by the rush of someone down the corridor. There was some whispering but he couldn't make out anything definite. As he returned, for a moment he wondered if Miranda had tried to come through and been discovered. Back in bed, he suddenly realized what his dream had been about. He had been with his ex-wife in a field playing with their child. He could not identify the place, but worse than this was the fact that they had never had a child.

He managed to avoid crossing paths with any of them for the best part of the following week. He stopped locking the door at night; she did not come through. A few days later his contact was finally renewed but in the least expected way.

He had gone through to the house to tell someone about a problem with his heater. As always, he knocked first, and thought he heard a murmur. Pippa appeared from her room, and the sound of someone hitting something and a muffled curse followed her out. She was wearing only a thin jumper that allowed a generous outline of her breasts and barely reached the tip of a teasing triangle of dark hair below. His observation of this detail was momentary, as she maintained eye-contact all the while he spoke. It was only as he was turning away that he registered for the first time the colour of her eyes, a pale blue so deceptive it had taken him this long to recognize.

The next day Michael caught him on his way in, grabbing him forcefully by the arm, and his heart dropped. He almost blurted out a confession, but he was so nervous that Michael had already said what he had to say before Paul could open his mouth. He was inviting him for a walk in the country at the weekend. Relieved as he was, he still wanted to make excuses, but his landlord's sudden affability, combined with a heavy-limbed presence, forced him to accept. It would probably only be this once, he reasoned. "Just us, of course. The women're off shopping Saturday," Michael added.

They walked for three hours with few breaks. Paul hadn't had so much exercise in years. Michael gave the impression that the route he was taking was arbitrary, but this was un-

likely. Somehow it still disturbed him.

The journey seemed to divide into two parts, each fashioned by Michael's steady commentary. The first part was his elaboration of flora. He knew the name for everything, and his detailed, enthusiastic display of knowledge confounded Paul, who could barely name half the trees he ever saw. He marvelled at one point when Michael shouted out 'marjoram' and leapt across a muddy ditch to kindle in his hand the herb that Paul only knew as compressed leaves. The other part was dedicated to a litany of the ailments suffered by one variety or other of plant or tree.

"They're all diseased," he said later on, picking up a silveryblue clump of earth which looked like a drowned plant.

"What makes you so pessimistic?" Paul asked.

"You can tell from the colour alone."

"No, I mean it's a bit general to say *everything*'s dying, isn't it?"

"It's part of my job, but anyway..." He looked off into the distance, as if contemplating whether he should continue. He didn't

Paul perceived an injustice somewhere. What did Michael, with his own home, a good job, a beautiful wife and daughter, have to feel so miserable about? Paul thought of how he no longer fitted into city life, how he expected a disaster at every turn. But the country was no solution either. It was empty. What eventually came out of his mouth sounded neither sincere nor portentous.

"I often feel as if the earth is slipping away beneath my feet, as if there's going to be some god-almighty crash."

For a moment Michael stared at him as if to check his sanity, then suddenly burst out with a laugh. "Paul, you *are* a character."

The jocularity remained around them for a while like a low mist, but when it disappeared it was as if an acrid deposit had settled deep inside them.

They entered a forest and walked along the edge of an empty river. For long stretches neither said anything, and in places, where it became suddenly dark, Paul felt as if he were on his own and the figure of Michael were the cloaked figure of death he had no choice but to follow. He was breathing hard most of the way till they reached a peak, and then they halfslid, half-ran to the bottom. After ascending another hill, they emerged onto the ridge where he and Miranda had made love, and from which they could see the house.

Michael sat down on one of the stones where he and Miranda had sat. Paul remained standing, a little nervously. An unexpected mustard sky was sliding away from the town, as if this were infused in a crucible. If there was a calm, it was an unconscious one.

"She's dying," Michael said finally, his gaze still on the house. "I should have told you but..."

"Who? Miranda?"

"A cancer of some kind. These doctors..."

There was nothing Paul could say. Only the pain of his foot striking the stone expressed anything.

Paul knew he would not be able to keep the knowledge of Miranda's illness to himself for long. It was only a question of when he would disclose it. He did not see any of the family for the rest of the day, and almost succeeded in forgetting about them until late in the evening when he was woken by the sound of Michael and Miranda shouting at each other and Pippa crying. Finally, he heard Michael leave, smashing the door shut on the way out. Stretched, projected rectangles rode across the back wall of his room as the car skidded in the mud, swung round, and finally left the yard.

He paced around the room for some time, unable to calm down. Finally, he went up to the door and listened, but it was quiet.

He could not remember eventually settling down to sleep, but he felt what woke him was located in the dream rather in the house. It crossed his mind that perhaps Michael had returned, slamming the door again, but his car wasn't in the yard. Then he remembered it was something to do with the painting, the penetrating stare of the naked woman's almost cerulean eyes.

Checking first for any sound, he entered their part of the house, proceeding stealthily down to the living room. The painting stood out in the perse moonlight, seeming to exist independently, until his eyes adapted to the rest of the room.

Shivering, he stared at the figure, and might have fallen asleep standing had not the murmured words not worked their way in between layers of sleep and consciousness.

"Green to blue, green to blue, green to blue," he heard, like train carriages running over sleepers, as the comparative colours of Miranda's and Pippa's eyes superimposed themselves on each other. He could not have said if he had heard those words in a dream or in actuality, but a snapping sound sent a flash of white across this night vision. He moved quickly back, looking around the room, and only after some time saw the dot-encrusted figure of Miranda in the armchair on the far side.

He squatted down at her feet. She said nothing while he searched in vain for the green in her eyes now, but the near darkness did not allow it. "Green to blue," she said finally, confirming his suspicion.

"They've gone?" he said.

She nodded, and her body shook.

He thought of his wife, of the dark, of emptiness, where there were no colours, no sounds, no children.

She took his hand and led him upstairs. They looked into Pippa's empty room. He knew now he would stay.

Neither of them returned, either the next day or in the days after.

Brian Howell has taught English in Hungary, England, The Czech Republic and Japan, where he now lives with his wife and son. He has had stories published in magazines, anthologies and newspapers, and is close to completing a novel about the painter Jan Vermeer.



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LIVE BARKER

THE ESSENTIAL CLIVE BARKER

HarperCollins hb, 576pp, £16.99

GALILEE

HarperCollins pb, 804pp, £6.99

Clive Barker

reviewed by Steven Dennett



Evidently it's time to take stock of Clive Barker's career, and pitch it to the 'mainstream', so Harper-Collins have produced this handsome volume anthologising the prolific polymath. The Essential Clive

Barker doesn't bring any new fiction to Barkerphiles but, as well as a supportive fantasy's-not-for-geeks preface by Armistead Maupin, it does include an illuminating introduction by the author. Here Barker puts the boot in regarding the academic killjoys who are so barren and rational that they hate 'the fantastique', and trawls his own background for the images which are the source material for his later imaginings. I found it compelling - especially his account of an earliest memory, back at Liverpool's Speke Airport, where the 'Bird Man', Leo Valentin, crashed to the ground after his balsa-wood wings clipped the aeroplane from which he jumped. Valentin spiralled downwards, his trick gone hopelessly wrong, but the fouryear-old Clive Barker was ushered inside the family car during the descent - so he only saw his dad and uncle stoically watching the tragedy of Bird Man crunching into the car park.

Looking back on this particular drama Barker decides it was here he understood something: that witnessing the forbidden was essential to his idea of maleness.

Hence the fictions that follow: the peep at the forbidden (whimsy outlawed by the rational; the body rejected by the mind; death denied by life). The volume is organised thematically, so his novels are mercilessly cut up and redistributed according to headings like 'Worlds' and 'Memory'. It makes for an amusing and appropriately episodic bed-time read. Fortunately, for those of us who as a matter of policy hate these bitty 'best of' anthology things, there are four complete short stories which show off Barker's ability to economise.

But Barkerphiles know, of course, that it's fecundity - stories giving birth to stories - that marks Barker's major fictional outings, and this book is no exception. And whatever Barker's wish for the reader to use his intelligence, make the thematic links to arrive at some grasp of essentials, he also acknowledges the nomad: one who wants to wander in the labyrinthine mind of an other, rather than diagram the world. It's curious, then, that Barker quotes one



of his heroes, Borges, as if to dismiss him: in one of Borges's slender parables, a writer realises at the end of his task of mapping the world that he has, in fact, drawn only a picture of his own face. Barker questions Borges's central conceit, suggesting that the reverse may also be true: a psychic selfportrait legitimately maps the world.

I doubt Barker really thinks this, judging by one of the excerpts from Galilee included here, where Barker shows he understands the pleasure of early maps: those which had Brazil as a tiny island somewhere in the Atlantic, and daft monsters floating around in far-flung oceans. The narrator, trying to locate his half-brother, finds his maps too fanciful; it's all filigreed beasts, windy angels and krakens. 'In the midst of such wonders,' he writes, 'my pathetic attempts at rational projections went south. I left off my calculations and sat in the midst of the maps like a man trading in such things, waiting for a buyer.' The maps are useless because they are too specific to their makers' psyches; and therein lies their value.

Barker doesn't like theorists. He prides himself instead in his role as practitioner, and admires the poets of excess: William Blake, Hieronymus Bosch. Introducing a section called 'Bestiary', Barker ponders Bosch's paintings, specifically the viewer's problem in dealing with the sheer detail of Bosch's devilish creations. Barker, like Bosch, is the anti-semiotician; he likes to make sure there's so much that it can't fit an academic's schema. If I have one major problem with his writing, it's that he likes to work with broader brush-strokes than can delineate character; that's the curse of the metaphysician, and that's why his remembrance of the Speke Airport incident is so appealing: it's real sounding in its specificity, and economy. The splendour of invention sometimes lacks heart.

Galilee, out now in paperback, is testimony to where Barker is at. The Books of Blood have been excreted along with the 1980s, and, in keeping with how our nineties have turned out, Barker is looking for

something beyond the physical bloody splatter. Galilee is firmly American, exuberantly epic, louchely sprawling. It wants to draw American spirit, and it's typical of Barker's fictional balls that he should attempt such a thing when there are still people like Toni Morrison and Don Delillo sharing his planet.

The novel depicts a family feud between the Geary family - famous since the civil war, rich as the Rockefellers, glamorous as the Kennedys - and the Barbarossas - who are no ordinary family at all. The Barbarossas have been around since the beginning of time - they're mini-gods, led by the matriarch Cesaria, sent into turmoil by the prodigal son Galilee's seduction of Geary women. Galilee is the Barker hero - the dark-skinned guy with sexual appetite and bags of charisma. He's half-Jesus, half-Satan; ambiguous just the way Barker likes them. It's as if he's a product of the marriage of Heaven and Hell.

The story is narrated by Maddox Barbarossa, who weaves past and present events into a rambling, digressive narrative of violence, fabulism and pornography. The best bits are intensely erotic, or lightly-tripping mythic; the worst bits are the leaden intrigues of the Gearys. (Barker isn't much good at the texture of the everyday, of finding significance in mundane things. His poetry is firmly epic.)

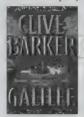
As far as the aesthetic of this novel is concerned, it's Bosch that you'll think of: Maddox says, at one point, 'I will attempt to conjure common divinities, and show you the loveliness of filth.'

Whether you go for this depends on your attitude to Barker's insistent and portentous metaphysical thrust; call it a belief in essential myth versus superficial culture, if you like. The dice are loaded, in Galilee, in favour of the mini-gods: the Geary men - horribly material, horribly white - have little to redeem them.

But this is where Barker has mined the subconscious and allowed his love of the playful, fertile imagination to lead him into alarming cliché. The Barbarossas are darkhued sexual wunderkinder, close to the primal; being a groovy noble savage, Galilee can't resist making off with Geary women.

In Barker's world this is dynamic and positive, of course, but it's still basically stereotypical. Turning paranoid redneck propaganda 180 degrees like this is aesthetically and politically naive.

It goes to show that sometimes the fantastic is a projection merely of outmoded



cultural baggage; sometimes rational analysis is exciting, worthwhile, even

Contra William Blake, the road of excess doesn't always lead to the palace of wisdom.

NOVELS

DENIAL Peter James

Orion pb, 498pp, £5.99 reviewed by Peter Tennant



Forgotten movie star Gloria Lamark commits suicide when forced to confront the reality of her fading beauty and lost career. Her son Thomas, a mummy's boy in his forties with a genius level IQ and more mental

problems than Norman Bates on a bad day, sets out to pay back all the nasty people he holds responsible for his mother's death. Top of his list is Gloria's psychiatrist, Dr Michael Tennent.

There's a by the numbers feel to this book, with James's most obvious strengths as a writer not used to full advantage. His best novels take as their point of departure some thoroughly researched area of cutting edge or borderline science (eg cryogenics, hypnotic regression, after death experience, artificial intelligence), and go on from there to build into complex and intellectually stimulating stories. Denial is nothing like that. The author has done his research and the backdrop to the story is convincing as regards police procedure and psychiatry, but media saturation has given us all an ersatz expertise in such matters, and so there's little in the way of fresh food for thought, no speculative dimension to the proceedings. Another of the author's hallmarks is rigorous plotting, but again it lets him down, with an unnecessary psychic flash and some convenient bouts of stupidity on the part of a supposedly intelligent character standing out like those proverbial sore thumbs. What we're left with is a rather uninspiring thriller, fast paced and competently written, with some good characterisation and a neat twist at the end, but nothing to truly distinguish it from any one of a dozen other Silence of the Lambs wannabes. James's fans will be disappointed. This is a step back for him.

CHI Alexander Besher Orbit pb, 306pp, £6.99 reviewed by Ian Simpson



In 2038, Chi, the alexia of life, the energy that permeates through all organic matter, has taken on druglike qualities. It can be graded and implanted, and there is a disturbingly perverse black market it. Paul

Sykes stumbles into this underworld in a rather *noir*ish fashion while on route to find Tommy the orang-utan. Frank and Trevor Gobi are embroiled by choice. The father,

Frank, is on the trail of Wing Fat, a cartel head who is having an affair with an elevator! The son has a far more mysterious agenda, and what is his connection with Terry Gordon? And just what do the butterflies have to do with anything?

Besher, born in China and raised in Japan, knows a lot about Far East mysticism. Which is the problem. If *you* don't, you may find this otherwise likeable novel a little staccato. It is punctuated with odd terminology and Pacific Rim words, which makes it a little hard going. Added to that fact, there is a lot of italicised exposition – pages of sitting around ruminating about past events. And added to that, the continual introduction of new characters and ideas gives the feel of a new beginning several times throughout the novel, which lends to strangled read.

Which is a shame, because the ideas are highly original while in a recognisable but evolved planet. The best of which is interspecies communication, and a shrinking world population leading to the breading of super-intelligent orang-utans for humans to adopt.

FREEZER BURN Joe R Lansdale

Victor Gollancz pb, 245pp, £9.99 reviewed by Peter Tennant



The death of his mother plunges Bill Roberts into financial crisis. He keeps the body 'freeze dried' in her bedroom, but can't get the hang of forging mum's signature on the welfare checks. An attempt to set

matters right by robbing a firecracker stand goes disastrously wrong, and Bill ends up on the run from the police, leaving a trail of dead bodies in his wake, though to be fair these have more to do with accident than intent. Emerging from a swamp with his face hideously swollen by mosquito bites, Bill stumbles across Mr Frost's travelling freak show and accepts the owner's offer to hang with them for a while. With his face Bill fits right in. Frost is kind to him, he befriends Conrad the Dog Man and is fascinated by the frozen Ice Man, but the real attraction is Gidget, a pneumatic blonde with ambitions to match.

Plotwise this is pretty much *Double Indemnity* picked up, dusted off and dropped down in the middle of a freak show. It's fast paced, stylish, jam-packed with unusual characters, amiably un-PC and shot through with a mordant wit, in short all of the qualities we've come to expect from Lansdale's crime fiction. It's great fun for the three or four hours the experience lasts and I can't think of a single reason not to read it, but having done so you probably won't remember much about it in a couple of months' time. Tasty, but not nutritious.

DREAMING IN SMOKE Tricia Sullivan

Millennium pb, 290pp, £5.99 reviewed by Steven Dennett



Sullivan's third novel pitches one Kalypso Deed, a careless underachiever who rides shotgun on the dreams of others, into battle with Marcsson, a boring microbiologist whose dream Kalypso

accompanies in the rollercoaster opening. The virtual dreamworld – an aid to creative thinking – is provided by their life-support AI, Ganesh; their planet is T'nane, inhospitable and colonised by earth-borns who are there to study it and solve its ecological problems. When Marcsson's dream implodes, the AI that keeps the colonists alive crashes – and everyone gets tipped out onto the swirly, primeval-soupy planet. And everyone's gonna die.

This is hard-as-it-comes cyberthrash, and as such its characters are eclipsed by the indulgence in technical-manual detail and surreal gor-blimey-it's-a-giant-cigar imagery. Most interesting is the AI Ganesh, who seems to have a 'special relationship' with the Miles Davis obsessive Kalypso; but Ganesh gets shoved into the obscure background as less interesting beings argue and spit at each other.

The book is full of ideas worth chewing on - mathematics interfaced with ecology. the idea that abstractions could be regarded as living things - but these conceits get lost in the welter of detail. There's a problem of form here; Sullivan struggles against the convention that novels really need correct pacing and character identification to work. Sullivan's enthusiasm is for cyber-speculation married to a jazzed-out dissonant style; it almost suggests contempt for the reader. It's as if she wants the novel to disappear into some other form. What we end up with is a tremendously profligate sense of word-play, and a love of 'shooting up', as it were, on a nostalgic, slippery dream world. It leaves the novel feeling weirdly empty, all its substance - and memorability - sucked out.

THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION Gore Vidal

Abacus pb, 260pp, £6.99 reviewed by Peter Tennant

Vidal's latest novel combines the time changing agenda of earlier works with the anything goes exuberance of his 1978 *Duluth*. Imagine *Alice in Wonderland* rewritten by a satirist with a firm grasp of American history and given an underpinning in quantum physics and you'll have a vague idea what to expect.

Wonderland is the Smithsonian. After hours the exhibits come to life. A brain damaged replica of Lincoln acts as administrator of the institution, while pursuing a scholarly interest in ceramics. The other Presidents follow world events closely, in times of crisis summoning the present incumbent of the office to reap the benefit of their collective wisdom. There are clones and special windows which you can look out of and see the future. The numerous historic tableaux act as gateways into the past, through which residents can step into their year of choice.

Alice is T, a thirteen year old mathematics prodigy and schoolmate of one Gore Vidal, who is invited to the Smithsonian in 1939, on the eve of war, to help Oppenheimer and co build an atomic bomb in the basement. Solving the problem of nuclear fission is child's play to T, but he realises the doomsday possibilities of such a weapon in the wrong hands and conceives an even more audacious plan. With the aid of his guide in affairs of the heart, Mrs Grover Cleveland, T travels back in time to prevent WW2, then goes on to unravel the final secrets of the Smithsonian and his own being.

This is a book that seems to go off in all directions at once and constantly delights in its own cleverness. While paying lip service to scientific theories it uses them merely as a deus ex machina to other ends, and at all times with tongue firmly in cheek, sending up sensawunda overkill with a what rabbit can I pull out of my hat on this page mischievousness. More important to Vidal are the opportunities for political satire and to address concerns about the American drive to empire found in his mainstream fiction and non-fiction. It lacks the focus of his best work and, as with Duluth, the satire is spread too thin to be entirely effective, but the trip is enjoyable enough while it lasts, with more invention than can be found in an average season of your Star Trek franchise of choice.

STAND ON ZANZIBAR John Brunner Millennium pb, 650pp, £6.99 THE SIRENS OF TITAN **Kurt Vonnegut** Millennium pb, 224pp, £6.99 reviewed by Mat Coward



Certainly one of science fiction's best-known titles, I'm not sure Stand on Zanzibar is, these days, one of its most-read novels. Reading it for the first time, in 1999, it's a little hard to see quite why it had such an

impact on the imaginations and ambitions of a generation of writers. It is an odd and rather uneven mixture of adventure story, dystopia, satire and experimental fiction, told through straight narrative, verse, little essays, news snippets (real and imaginary), short stories and even jokes. Brunner was a good enough writer to make the whole very readable - but it's a difficult book to get a grip on. Set early in the 21st century (and first published in 1968), it depicts a future in which overpopulation is the key problem, and eugenics the solution adopted by most industrialised nations. Brunner draws on both soft and hard sciences to argue, essentially, that the future of the human race is in the hands of the human race; that humanity must be seen as one family, its needs and its fate indivisible; and that scientific advance cannot be viewed or practiced as something separate from political and economic structures - that politics must govern technology, rather than the other way around.

It is in that sense an extraordinarily topical book - which in itself suggests that the crises which face the world from time to time do not, despite appearances to the contrary, suddenly rear up out of nowhere. Quite the reverse: the problems we face, and which we as a species inflict on ourselves, are largely predictable by the application of scientific method to history, economics and sociology. The reason they seem to take us by surprise is that our leading thinkers are mostly so mesmerised by transient power structures and fashionable subideologies that they are incapable of seeing beyond the immediate.

This may be a Masterwork, as advertised - that is, a book which played an important part in the development of the genre. I'm not quite convinced that it is a classic, in the sense of something that will be read for pleasure long after its author's death.



The Masterworks series is on safer ground with Kurt Vonnegut. Many, if not most, of his novels are undeniably classics, but they continue to be discovered, unprompted, by every generation of readers

- nobody has to be told to enjoy Vonnegut. His work is just as strange - potentially just as 'difficult' - as Brunner's, but the frank intimacy of his storytelling prevents his unorthodox style from forming a barrier between author and audience. Most importantly of all, Vonnegut is an astonishingly skilful writer, and screamingly funny.

Sirens of Titan is about a spacecraft pilot who becomes trapped in 'a chrono-synclastic infundibulum', from which he materialises when his waveforms intercept a planet. (Incidentally, let's reclaim Vonnegut as a genre writer, not merely a satirist; he is absolutely a science fiction author, whatever the literary snobs might wish to believe.)

There's also a war between Mars and Earth, and a new world religion: the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent. But of course what it's really about is what Vonnegut, in his endlessly inventive way, is always about: the horrific comedy of war, and the methods sentient beings find to survive, psychically, in a self-evidently godless universe.

'When you get right down to it, everybody's having a perfectly lousy time of it, and I mean everybody, and the hell of it is, nothing seems to help much.' This is Vonnegut's familiar philosophy, as depressing as it is demonstrably untrue; give a starving man a piece of bread, and it helps - much. But we shouldn't take this nihilism at face value. Rather, he seems to be saying, 'Nothing seems to help - except for the things that help', and that the one thing which helps the most is that people continue to want to help.

As a series, SF Masterworks is a not-bad attempt at a worthwhile project. The publisher has gone for a trans-genre, Modern Classics approach, with smart, seriouslooking jackets. Unfortunately, it's all been done slightly on the cheap: the print tends towards the blobby, the proof-reading towards the sloppy, and the absence of introductory or biographical essays in the two volumes I've seen undermines their value as cornerstones of an SF library.

FOREVER AND EVER AMEN Joe Pemberton

Review pb, 215pp, £9.99 reviewed by Tim Lees

James is nine years old, and lives half his life in Manchester's Moss Side, the other half in the bizarre world of his own imagination. Here 60s kitsch, Motown and Hollywood mix with his parents' tales of life back on St Kitts; reality is a distinctly fluid medium for James. A street scene turns into a Busby Berkeley dance routine, with music by Phil Spector; an aircraft plummets onto James's school; he imagines himself the object of a huge, self-glorifying carnival, The James Show, complete with Bing Crosby and Fred Astaire. These, however, are the brighter sides of James's world. In nightmares, he visits the West Indies, a magical but violent land. He meets a child-killer whose shirt is soaked in blood, and sees the white plantation owner slicing off a calf's head with a razor. His feelings of ambivalence towards his family's past are subtly and yet powerfully conveyed, echoes of slavery invoked but never named. Then there's the odd business of James's best friend, Aunty Mary, a local white woman, possibly mad - the English are all crazy, anyway - and very definitely dead...

The story wavers between fantasy and realism, both modes complementing one another. At times, with its parade of media icons and colonial types, it's almost reminiscent of Moorcock's Condition of Muzak, concerned with the way history is reinvented and obscured by later generations. Elsewhere, the reference point is much more Coronation Street. Adult dramas are played out before a child's eyes, leaving the reader to interpret them. The plot is slim, but each successive episode reveals another aspect of James's world, and propels him slowly to an understanding of his heritage, both English and West Indian; and with that, the novel seems to indicate, his ghosts and fantasies at last dissolve.

There are many good reasons to read this book, not least for its insights into a community still little understood in Britain, and for a portrait of Moss Side far removed from its usual guns 'n' gangs image. Pemberton's real gift, though, is in his evocation of childhood, comical yet never patronising, instantly recognisable to anybody, of whatever culture. Sense of place is strong, and yet the end result is a kind of Mancunian magic realism, strange but familiar, able to hint at large themes even in a small-scale or domestic setting. And best of all, it's also very, very funny.

INDIGO **Graham Joyce**

Michael Jospeh pb, 247pp, £9.99 reviewed by Andrew Hedgecock



Novels acclaimed as 'books to change the way you think' tend to be epic in style, encyclopaedic in the range of their concerns and brimming with ludic invention - think of Robert Pirsig's Zen and the Art of

Motorcycle Maintenance, Orhan Pamuk's The New Life and Robert Anton Wilson's Illuminatus cycle.

The enormously underrated Graham Joyce paints on a smaller canvas. His books are lyrical – studies of private perceptions rather than grand expositions on 'the way we live now' - and he's more interested in emotional exploration than intellectual game playing. But his stories are excursions into the debatable lands of the modern psyche – every bit as subversive of received wisdom, fundamental certainties and established frameworks for interpreting the world as any philosophical novel.

Joyce's seventh novel, Indigo, is a softly spoken masterpiece. Like his other recent work - The Tooth Fairy and The Stormwatcher - it provokes a deep, disquieting and slowly developing unease. But this time his narrative tightrope walk between the fantastic and the familiar is more spectacular and technically accomplished than ever. Joyce invests the commonplace with a rich seam of magic and compelling symbolism - centring on invisibility, lycanthropy and the illusive colour indigo. And this complex fictional edifice is underpinned with quirky humour and immaculate evocations of people, events and places.

On one level Indigo is a frightening, sad, seductively unresolved and utterly nontraditional ghost story - but there are also elements of horror, folk myth, allegory and detective novel. Disillusioned private detective Jack Chambers is persuaded to act as executor of the will of his estranged father, Tim - an explorer of the occult, variously characterised as guru, charlatan and evil magician. Jack sets out on a two-fold mission: to find a missing woman (the main beneficiary of the will) and to publish Tim's bizarre and deeply disturbing manuscript

DISCO RELAX

Forced Entertainment

Cambridge Drama Centre, 28th January 2000

reviewed by Tom Hunter

Only in Britain is 'Nightlife' still a dirty word and, famed quirky sense of humour or not, when it comes to finding something to do with your life after midnight we're always on the wrong end of the joke. And with that let me welcome you to the uncertain world of



Disco Relax. Hidden away (and best forgotten) in the privacy of an after hours drinking pit, two girls with nowhere better to go embark on a drunken conversation that takes in giggling innuendoes and lost punchlines alongside a series of heartfelt pleas to an unseen judge they imagine watching over them. Why does it always feel like there's better parties going on elsewhere?

As the name suggests Forced Entertainment don't always make for an easy night out. What can make them such a difficult prospect in the first instance is their technique of developing new work from an ongoing process of mixed up moments. Overheard dialogue, borrowed characters and stolen plots all feed into their ongoing obsession with love, fragmentation and the need to confess. Probably a fair mix of what you'd expect to find if you've ever been the last one still sober at a party.

If all this is beginning to sound suspiciously postmodern then you're probably getting the idea, although for once the PoMo trappings are in capable hands, and if this sounds like a somewhat unlikely recommendation just remember that sometimes even the best reviewers should encourage you to make up your own mind.

on invisibility. From England to Rome via Chicago, Jack is drawn into the corrosive darkness of his father's world - a world of deception, psychological control, obsessive disciples, corrupted dreams and dangerous eroticism. And Jack's journey of self-discovery is as harrowing as his investigation of the last years of his father's life.

This is a work of astonishing narrative power. The intrigue and mystery are deftly handled; Jack's sense of fatalistic despair, and the sense that he's straying into physical and psychological peril, is moving and frightening; the sex scenes pack an enormous erotic charge; and there's the sense that the reader is being lured into a halfforgotten nightmare. Joyce's subtle and luminous evocation of Tim Chambers's search for an enchanted, numinous realm - just beyond quotidian, material 'reality' - is reminiscent of M John Harrison's wonderful Egnaro.

But Indigo is not merely a tour de force of technical control, emotional power and playful intelligence - it's an impressive insight into the joy and jeopardy of the quest to re-enchant the world through a potent brew of myth, symbol, ritual and dream.

MISSION CHILD Maureen McHugh

Orbit pb, 385pp, £6.99 reviewed by Peter Tennant



McHugh's latest novel is set in a universe where, after centuries of isolation, a technologically backward colony world is once again in contact with Earth. It is the story of Janna, the child of the title, raised in a

Mission, part school and part trading post. When the people of the Mission are slaugh-

tered Janna sets out on a journey that will take her to the very heart of her world and back out again to its remotest places, that will see her bear a child, masquerade as a man, work with and for offworlders, befriend a shaman and fall in love with a dealer in black market technology.

This is a novel with a rich and varied cultural backdrop and a convincing science fictional setting. However while such things can be appreciated for their own worth they aren't the be all and end all of the story, simply a stage on which Janna acts out her search for a place where she belongs, an identity that is true to her own nature rather than a response to the expectations of others. As with McHugh's debut novel China Mountain Zhang the personal dominates, but this is a richer, more complex book, one in which the SFnal elements are an essential part of the structure, a beautifully written and compelling slice of fiction. Recommended.

THE SECOND ANGEL **Philip Kerr**

Orion pb, 432pp, £6.99 CORRUPTING DR NICE

John Kessel

Millenium pb, 286pp, £6.99 reviewed by Antony Mann



In Philip Kerr's The Second Angel, Dana Dallas has a problem. His young daughter Caro is diagnosed with a genetic illness which can be effectively treated only with repeated blood transfusions. No big deal, you

might think, but this is the year 2069, and a nasty virus has infected ninety percent of the world's population. The desperate masses live - and die - in squalour, the

healthy few live it up in the secure Clean Bill of Health Zones. All it takes to defeat the disease is a transfusion of pure blood, but blood has become the new gold, and nobody well placed enough to have accumulated any wants to see it wasted on the poor and sick. Luckily, Dallas is a rich man with a huge blood stash. Unluckily, he is the top designer for Terotech, the global firm responsible for building the labyrinthine security systems which protect the Blood Banks from would-be thieves. For when Dallas's boss King discovers that his golden boy will soon be using up his savings (ie his blood store) to keep his daughter alive, he suspects that Dallas will eventually become a security risk, and so the odious Rimmer is despatched to murder the whole family. Things go wrong - the wife and kid cop it, but Dallas survives to begin a Clint Eastwood-style revenge mission to rob the biggest Blood Bank of them all, on the moon.

A fair plot, and the excitement continues apace, as Dallas assembles a gang of villains and takes on the defences which he himself designed. In fact, it might even make a decent movie. Frankly, that's the problem. The book is full of interesting ideas, but ultimately, badly let down by poor characterisation. Main and subsidiary characters alike read like stock standard cut-outs from a big-budget action flick. Even Dallas, who loses his wife and only child to a callous assassin, has nothing to feel. Instead we are expected to dip into our neatly-filed catalogue of revenge stories and assume his emotions for him. This is fine in a film, where a single camera shot is often enough to signify intent or motivation, but it just doesn't work in a book. In fact, four of Kerr's novels, including this one, are currently in film development. Perhaps this is the way to write to attract the attention of Hollywood. It almost feels as though the lack of depth is intentional. An okay book to watch, but not much of a read.



By contrast, John Kessel's Corrupting Dr Nice is not just a schematic for a movie, but a real live novel. Not for the first time demonstrating my profound ignorance, Kessel is a writer previously unknown to me

- but happily one I can recommend without reservation. The Dr Nice of the title is Dr Owen Vannice, heir to a fortune in the year 2063, who in transporting a dinosaur from the past via Herod's Jerusalem falls foul of time-travelling grifters Genevieve Faison and her father August - until Owen and Genevieve fall for each other big time. But does the course of true love ever run in a chronologically linear direction? Unlikely. And just what are the consequences of transporting a baby apatosaurus from the late-Cretaceous to the present?

It's a good sign when you're engrossed enough to forget you're actually reading, and then every so often are brought up by a striking idea or turn of phrase. This book will do me - sharply satirical, funny, cleverly plotted, and with its heart in the right place. Who knows? It might even make a decent film.

THE INFLATABLE VOLUNTEER **Steve Aylett**

Phoenix House pb, 166pp, £8.99 reviewed by Steven Dennett



There's an amusing review of Steve Aylett's short story collection Toxicology on amazon.com, which says in two lines that it's complete crap. No argument or anything. Not surprisingly, no one has recorded this

review as 'useful' on their little voting pad - apart from me, because I have sympathy for the guy: Aylett's violent writing provokes reaction rather than informed discourse. The reviewer even left his e-mail address; I admire his bravery, but I fear for his hard drive.

Aylett's new spume of nonsense, The Inflatable Volunteer, is another cut-up festival of perpetual thuggery. Narrative development and characterisation are jettisoned in favour of surface-sweeps of hallucinogenic mini-scenes. Rather pathetically, in the face of the lack of plot the publicity blurb ends with: 'anything can happen and does, all the time'. One suspects a collectively dismayed throwing up of hands around the Phoenix House typewriter. But who blames them? Basically, there's a bloke called Eddie, and everyone's some kind of hoodlum, and there are loads of insects and bones being splintered, and raw guts. Etcetera.

Aylett is the boy jester. Knowingly puerile, he's at his best when he's wrily sending up his whole enterprise. Like Stewart Home, or Turner Prize winners, if you take him seriously you end up looking stupid. He'll always be one jump away from whatever a critic could carp about. (Story? Wake up, Grandad, it's Y2K.) For the post-Burroughs avant-pulpsters, it's all about the repeatedly unsettling experience of the writing rather than olde worlde stuff like connection and emotion. Aylett's world is substance-less noir; his packaging is glossy and druggy, and his metaphors are built for laughs, not swoons. Fizz and splutter, sound and fury, and a wealth of clever, funny lines – but it signifies nothing more than a party balloon in a queasy student's kitchen. Which is the whole point.

PERDIDO STREET STATION China Miéville

Macmillan hb, 717pp, £16.99 reviewed by Rosanne Rabinowitz

Isaac is a scientist. Fat, genial and a bit of lad, he's fallen out with academia and lives on freelance research and dodgy dealings. His girlfriend Lin is an artist who hangs out with subversives, bohos and avant-gardeners. Her work is just getting recognition, but it's a long haul for this girl from the slums who has divided feelings about her origins. Lin and Isaac's mixed relationship is considered somewhat scandalous. Isaac, you see, is a human boy and Lin is an insectoid khepri.

The author of King Rat is back and no, it's not another trawl through the mean streets of London. There's absolutely no mention of drum 'n' bass. Instead we journey through the mucky streets, canals and nests of 'New Crobuzon'. Humans, mutants and a dazzling array of alien races struggle on in this dark, dirt-ridden city ruled by slick politicians and crime bosses, backed by a brutal militia. Though distinctly different than King Rat, Perdido Street Station also focuses on the marginalised and outcasts of its world.

Lin is commisioned to create a sculpture of a notorious crime boss, done in khepri fashion with 'colourberries' and spit. Isaac is visited by a huge bird-like garuda asking him to restore his ability to fly, having lost his wings in a brush with the law. The garuda is prepared to pay well, and Isaac sympathises with his plight. So the plot unfolds at a leisurely pace. All stories converge as New Crobuzon simmers with tension leading up to a strike, and a new terror threatens from the skies.

Miéville writes with a vast panoramic sweep, in intricate prose that drips with decay and darkness - and vitality. He creates alien landscapes and beings, yet he touches on familiar feelings and dilemmas as his characters duck and dive and try to survive. He conjures up some truly fabulous creatures, most notably a cross-dimensional, super-intelligent if autistic spider-mutant who talks in poetry and lops off ears on a

However, something misses when the nasty arch-creatures come on the scene. Too much 'slime' and 'ichor' gets flung about! It jars with the general tenor of the writing, as if a bottle of HP (as in Lovecraft?) sauce has been spilled into a stew full of complex flavours. And considering what they eat, these creatures come across a little too thick and unsubtle. In a related problem, the blam-blam action scenes often feel out of step within a plot that brims with telling detail and quirks. But maybe that's just my bias that 'action' is often overdone and overrated in genre fiction.

Yet the book ends perfectly on a tense and surprising note. Though he draws on some familiar fantasy elements, Miéville combines them in a memorable and unique tale. Perhaps Perdido is reminiscent of early Delaney (Fall of the Towers vintage), infused with a bitter Brechtian sensibility. Police and thieves are brothers under the skin, uneasy alliances are made and broken, and 'heroes' don't get tickertape parades for their pains. Imaginative and unsettling, Perdido Street Station is an outstanding work that raises political and philosophical questions in an entertaining way. Read it!

CINEMA BOOKS

RIDLEY SCOTT: THE MAKING OF HIS MOVIES Paul M Sammon

Orion pb, 152pp, £6.99

STEVEN SPIELBERG: THE MAKING OF HIS MOVIES

George Perry

Orion pb, 144pp, £6.99

The first two titles of a series of biographies of film directors working today. Both are entertaining and anecdotal, but also concentrate on the individual director's approach to filmmaking and highlight the unique elements of their films. The authors are eminently qualified for their subjects (Perry is a distinguished film critic who has interviewed Speilberg many times; Sammon is the author of *Future Noir: The Making of Blade Runner*) and so both books must come highly recommended. Illustrated with rare, behind-the-scenes photographs, they also include a collection of unabridged reviews taken from *Variety*, which should help ensure good b.o.





CHILDREN OF THE MIND Orson Scott Card

Orbit pb, 387pp, £6.99 reviewed by Peter Tennant



This is the fourth book in Card's multiple award winning Ender saga, and in many ways it reprises the problems of the previous volume, but offering permanent solutions as opposed to the stopgap measures of

Xenocide.

Ender, now an elderly man, is on the planet Lusitania with his family, where humans live in harmony with two alien races, the piggies and buggers, but a fleet sent by the Starways Congress is en route to destroy Lusitania and prevent the spread of the descolada virus. Ender's helpmate Jane, an evolved computer intelligence, is faced with extinction as the Net that gives her life is shut down. Peter and Val, two aspects of Ender's personality given bodily form on a trip Outside in the previous book, race against time to prevent disaster.

Card's prose sweeps the reader along, so that you're deep into the story within a few pages, personally involved in what is happening to these people. He gives us a diversity of cultures and fascinating ideas, political theory and human drama, space opera and a sense of what, for want of a better term (and maybe there isn't one) I shall call spirituality. Card impresses himself on the mind as a writer intensely engaged with ethical concerns, but in a nonjudgemental way; a writer who believes in ignorance rather than evil, who shows us his characters warts and all, yet still allows us to care for them, to feel some of his own compassion for their failings. They struggle on against the odds to become older and wiser as, hopefully, do we all.

A word of warning. While *Children* can be taken as a stand alone volume, getting up to speed requires some effort and I recommend buying the previous books, all of which have been reissued by Orbit. Together

they comprise one of science fiction's finest achievements, the kind of writing and ideas which typify the genre at its inspirational best.

THE BOOK OF REVELATION Rupert Thomson

Bloomsbury hb, 264pp, £12.99 reviewed by Steven Dennett

You're a British ballet dancer living in Holland. One day you're abducted by three women, and kept prisoner in a white room. The women – who adore you – wear cloaks and hoods all the time, so they remain featureless, apart from their sexual domination of you. It might seem a pretty good deal – except that love will do strange things. Soon, the mutilation begins.

This is the scenario which opens Rupert Thomson's sixth novel, and what follows is survival dependent on the narrator's cataloguing any personal characteristics he can find: he needs to make differences between his captors in order to gain some control. What in a normal horror thriller would be strung out into 300 pages is curtailed here, so that a more extraordinary path can be followed, of dealing with the trauma of loss of control. Our bodies, other people, the work of time, all have their say in what happens to us.

In this respect Thomson's choice of a dancer is surprisingly good as a somewhat unusual everyman. He is, as he admits in his first-person narration, vain and self-satisfied. He makes sure his body does what it's told, until his imprisonment changes everything. And it so happens that turning thirty roughly coincides with the time of his abduction. We're being lobbed an extended metaphor here: the white room is that moment when everyone realises the severe limits of their personal control.

For the most part Thomson stays this side of pretentiousness, though some readers will consider the shift from first-person to third-person in the white room to be merely confusing. The remarkably privileged life of the narrator could also be off-putting –

he's beautiful, effortlessly attracts women, and financially he seems to do very well out of obscure relatives' wills. Thomson also gets away with a little plot lubrication that genre-marketed authors would try harder to avoid – there's no police investigation into the narrator's disappearance, for example, since his girlfriend inexplicably assumes he's found another woman.

But while Thomson isn't the world's greatest plotter, his strength is in the exact rendering of psychological states and physical surroundings. He shows an almost paranoid need to survey immediate terrain, which is why there's a kind of frenetic sensory overload in his books. Characters have to pay absolute attention to their worlds as if their lives depended on it; this isn't a fault, because Thomson sets up appropriate situations for his ice-cold poetry. It means that, ultimately, this is a fine novel of calm understatement, written by someone with a brain.

NIGHT OF THE WOLF Alice Borchardt

Voyager pb, 454 pp, £11.99 reviewed by Rosanne Rabinowitz



Night of the Wolf is second in a series that began with The Silver Wolf. The books seem to be independent of each other except for theme: werewolves. Our hairy friends are back again! As the recent TTA story 'Spirit

Dance' by Douglas Smith shows, the genre can still be given a different and engaging twist. But Borchardt's book doesn't deliver it. Her werewolf isn't quite standard issue, but the overwrought and overblown writing most definitely is.

As the Romans secure absolute rule in Gaul, Maeniel hangs out with his pack and periodically sticks his snout into human affairs. He transforms from man to wolf as it suits him – especially when an attractive human girl is about. He falls hard for Imona, a married woman in her thirties from a well-placed Gaulish family. After a massacre by Roman soldiers she disappears and he follows her trail into the heart of the empire, where he meets up with Caesar, Cleo and the gang.

The 450-odd pages of this book teem with prose so purple it's positively aubergine-coloured. 'Wailing, sobbing and at last, screaming out the triumph of cold and dark over light and warmth. Over the eternal frozen death over the fleeting loves of a transient springtime.' Oh dear. Or how about this: 'As ready to cradle a child to her breast, or a man searching for that burning delight touched with the mystery of creation between her thighs, and to share her delight in union with him, even as he brought his fire to rouse hers.'

It's really a shame, because some cracking tales lurk under the excess verbiage. Borchardt realises her settings well, and interweaves the fantastic and historical

with dexterity and imagination. She tells us interesting stuff about the habits of wolves, if not much background on werewolves. There are also some passages of nice writing and even one or two hints of tongue-in-cheek humour.

No doubt there'll be a follow up book to this. Give Borchardt a good kick-ass editor and it might not be bad at all.

SNOW WHITE AND THE 7 SAMURAI Tom Holt

Orbit hb, 308pp, £15.99 reviewed by Keith Blount



If The Matrix could be reworked by the Brothers Grimm and then adapted by Terry Pratchett, the result would in all probability be something akin to Tom Holt's latest offering, Snow White and the Seven Samu-

rai. As the title suggests, the story involves a number of fairy and folktales becoming utterly garbled. If this sounds like a Warner Brothers cartoon though, the premise has been unashamedly borrowed from the Wachowski Brothers – for this fairyland is entirely computer generated, and the Wicked Queen's mirror (Mirrors 3.1) is its mainframe server. Trouble starts when three humans hack into this world and accidentally switch off the mirror, crashing the dimensional database and causing one fairytale to spill into another. Suddenly the three pigs hire the Dwarf with No Name (Dumpy) to kill the big bad wolf, but the big bad wolf is transformed into a Frog Prince by Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother and tries to blow down the three bears' house by mistake - and so on.

In keeping with the genre, from its 'once upon a time' opening the prose is crisp and deceivingly child-like, but it is infused with Holt's trademark wit from the very first simile: 'roses scramble up the door-frame like young executives up a corporate hierarchy'. Unfortunately though, any hopes raised in the first chapter of acerbic insights into the traditions of the fairytale or the modern obsession with computers are soon disappointed: the characters rarely rise above the cute or twee, and most of the 'humour' revolves around the hackneyed joke of animals perverting human phrases (pigs saying 'you took the words right out of my snout' and 'this is getting out of trotter'; a description of the wolf as 'scared droppingless'). Other throwaway lines were actually thrown away a few years ago by those Politically Correct Fairytale collections (an elf's insistence on being called an 'indigenous fairylander', for example). A few worn and juvenile jokes might have been forgiven had there been more substance to the whole: but even then it is difficult to imagine any justification for including the scene in which the Dwarf with No Name knocks back goldtop as Clint Eastwood does whiskey - in how many cartoons have we seen this already? Even the computer satire rapidly descends into nothing more than a series of puns: using the reflection in a pail of water when the mirror has 'crashed', for instance, is called 'backing up to sloppy'.

All this is a great shame, as there are glimpses of what this book might have been: there is the (all too) occasional wry observation about how the fairytale world works, as with the guards who only come into existence when they are called; and there is the inspired appearance of the Brothers Grimm as a pair of FBI-style Men in Black, which approaches making some sort of comment on the existence of modern folktales (conspiracy theory, mysterious observers) but then opts instead for a cheap gag. And this, sadly, is the main flaw of the book: Holt seems remarkably uninterested in the workings or significance of the fairytale beyond getting his next laugh. Had he actually studied his source material even if only to read the landmark analyses of the genre by such scholars as Vladimir Propp - there might have been more to laugh about. As it is, for all its charm, this is ultimately a one-joke book that runs to three hundred pages, and unless you're a die-hard Tom Holt fan or a computer programmer with a penchant for Disney, you would be better off watching The Matrix again or re-reading the Brothers Grimm.

SHORT STORIES

UNCONOUERED COUNTRIES Geoff Ryman

Voyager pb, 275pp, £6.99 reviewed by Peter Tennant



This book consists of four novellas, two previously unpublished. The earliest, 'A Fall of Angels, or On the Possibility of Life Under Extreme Conditions', dates from 1976 and is as striking for the inventive way in

which the story is told as for the ideas it contains. In the far future an advanced but still recognisably human civilisation has spread throughout the galaxy, the disembodied angels acting as its shock troops in an endless war against entropy and the heat death of the universe. Contact with an alien entity leads two angels and their corporeal handlers to question their existence, a life that has no purpose other than to prolong itself indefinitely. It is a stunning performance, a richly textured narrative, and any and all editors who bounced it should have their resignations on somebody's desk by noon Friday at the latest. The second story, 'Fan', adopts a comparatively minimalist approach, inviting us into the life of Billie, whose existence revolves round the singer Eamon Strafe. While the plot becomes transparent after a certain point Ryman's exploration of obsession and exploitation remains compelling.

'O Happy Day!' caused controversy on its first appearance in 1985, depicting a future in which male aggression has driven women to adopt their own final solution, and homosexuals survive by acting as concentration camp guards. The scenario is unconvincing, but the characters and their situation are brilliantly realised, a story that is by turns repellent and moving, forcing the reader to confront issues he might prefer to ignore. Similar qualities permeate 'The Unconquered Country', Ryman's BFS Award winning novella from 1986, a fable of Cambodia in the 1970s. There's a magic realist feel to this, as we follow Third Child's resigned odyssey through a life and a landscape that is as strange as the surface of another planet and yet as horribly familiar as the headlines on last night's news. While misery endures, Ryman feeds a flame of hope that is burning brightly amid the ashes of despair.

There's a rare depth and emotional maturity to these novellas. They are beautifully crafted, but not easy stories. Ryman makes demands of the reader but, I suspect, far greater demands of himself. With an introduction by Samuel R Delany and an afterword by the author, Unconquered Countries is an unmissable volume.

BEST NEW HORROR 10 Edited by Stephen Jones

Robinson pb, 489pp, £6.99 reviewed by Peter Tennant

Best new horror is what it says on the cover and that's pretty much what you get, a selection of nineteen stories from the year 1998, plus an exhaustive overview of horror in that year and a necrology listing writers, actors etc. Most of the people you'd expect to find in such a volume are here, familiar names like Campbell, Straub, Ellison and Fowler. Jones's knowledge of the field is encyclopedic and his taste is assured. While no one reader is likely to endorse all of his choices the overall quality is very high. My personal favourites are the two longest stories, Straub's superb tale of revenge run amok 'Mr Clubb and Mr Cuff', and 'The Boss in the Wall: A Treatise on the House Devil' by Avram Davidson & Grania Davis, a riveting exploration of folklore in which Lovecraft meets X-Files style paranoia, either one alone justifying the price of admission. The rest are just icing on the cake.

This review could so easily degenerate into hyperbole. More interesting I think to examine the book's contents with a view to what clues we can discover regarding the horror genre's concerns and future direction on the brink of a new millennium. Most obviously, while some of the writers in residence might be unfamiliar to UK readers, each and every one of them comes with an impressive track record. Several inferences can be drawn from the lack of new names, none of which are encouraging.

Serial killers appear to be out of fashion, apart from the amiable torturers in Straub's story, who owe more to Pulp Fiction than Halloween. So too are vampires, though curiously this doesn't stop the publishers putting one on the cover. Ditto for those other genre archetypes/cliches (delete as applicable) the zombie, witch, cannibal and werewolf. Hauntings of one kind or another are still very much in vogue, but explicit violence is very much out, writers preferring to deal with its psychological effects rather than offer up atrocity scenarios for their schlock value.

Perhaps what's most evident is a turning back to the classics of the past, writers attempting to rework old ideas and breathe new life into the themes that served their predecessors so well. Straub's story is a modern retelling of Melville's Bartleby the Scrivener. Neil Gaiman's piece acknowledges a debt to Wilde's Dorian Gray and Tanith Lee admits the influence of MR James on her 'Yellow and Red'. Kim Newman offers us 'A Victorian Ghost Story', with strong echoes of Le Fanu, before giving the tale a modern, socially aware twist. However it is left to the seasoned iconoclast Christopher Fowler to present the most audacious and overtly metafictional piece, with his aptly titled 'Learning to Let Go' in which he cleverly deconstructs the familiar elements of the supernatural tale and then simply walks away. Another inference I don't want to deal with.

DARK TERRORS 4 Edited by Stephen Jones & David Sutton

Millennium pb, 349pp, £6.99 reviewed by Peter Tennant

Dark Terrors continues to build on its repu-

tation as the UK's leading (only?) horror anthology series, this latest volume weighing in with a tasty nineteen prime cuts by some of the best storytellers in the genre.

There's good writing here by the coffinload. Highlights include 'A Place to Stay' in which Michael Marshall Smith gives an unstuck in time twist to the familiar New Orleans vampire riff and Roberta Lannes's 'Mr Guidry's Head', a finely observed piece on a child's fears lingering into adulthood. My favourite story, Jay Russell's 'Sullivan's Travails', is a witty and engaging Hollywood ghost story, much lighter in mood than any of the other pieces (think Topper for the 90s). At the other end of the spectrum there's 'The Incredible True Facts in the Case' by David J Schow which seamlessly merges fiction and bloody fact to give us an alternate version of the Jack the Ripper murders. Poppy Z Brite offers a similar slice of docufiction with 'Entertaining Mr Orton', playwright Joe's death acting as the prelude to an erotic encounter. Ramsey Campbell's 'Never to be Heard' is a creepy piece in the Jamesian manner, with the world premier of a forbidden symphony, while 'Inside the Cackle Factory' by Dennis Etchison runs a cynical eye over the cutthroat world of television sitcoms.

Not everything appeals. 'The Great Fall'

by Richard Christian Matheson is a cleverly done character study, but too slight to make any real impact. From Donald R Burleson we get 'Tumbleweeds', an almost risible slice of bucolic horror. 'Suburban Blight' by Terry Lamsley, the longest story in the book and a tale with an eco message, lacks the subtle effects of his best work, perhaps because this time around the author gives us a rationale of sorts for what is taking place. On balance though there's much more here to like than not, and even the most demanding horror fan should find enough adrenaline kicks to jump-start his heart.

BEYOND LIES THE WUB SECOND VARIETY THE FATHER THING Philip K Dick

Millennium pb, £7.99 each reviewed by Mike O'Driscoll



These three reprint volumes - with another two to follow contain 75 stories, the bulk of them written between 1952 and 1954. They range widely in quality and mood, from the sub-Bradburyesque fantasies of 'The Cookie Lady' and 'Project: Earth', to the more recognisably Dickian stories such as 'Impostor' and 'The Hanging Stranger'. What most of them have in common is Dick's idiosyncratic world view and his concern with what it means to be human in an increasingly mechanised, unstable and xenophobic world. In the latter story, Dick offers a chilling exploration of paranoia in a dehumanised society that not only pre-



figures the concerns of 1950s SF films such as Invasion of the Bodysnatchers (the theme of bodily usurpation is alluded to more explicitly in the title story of The Father Thing), but which has powerful echoes of racist inspired lynchings in contemporary America. A more extreme slant on the theme is offered in the delirious 'Shell Game', in which a group of besieged colonists preparing for an invasion, are revealed to be paranoid schizophrenics, shipwrecked years before on the planet's surface. 'Misadjustment' is an early working through of two particularly Dickian obsessions, mutants and mental illness, with its exploration of a society whose stability is under threat from the power of parakineticists to physically manifest their delusions.

While 'Roog' displays a superficially lighthearted, even comic tone - a loval dog vainly attempts to warn his human owners of the threat posed by the strange and threatening Roogs, these latter being in fact the garbage men who come to empty the bins - one can also see the story as an early attempt at

representing the struggle of an 'everyman' to warn those he cares for of some unfathomable menace. Such ordinary mortals, struggling and very often failing, to come to terms with obscure threats - in contrast to Robert Heinlein's competent men of action who are always portrayed as being in control of their destinies - feature again and again in these stories, and indeed throughout the whole body of Dick's work. Think, for example, of Jason Taverner's identity slippage in Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said, or Barney Mayerson's ultimately futile struggles against the corporate machine, which, ironically, he himself is part of, in The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch. The notion of displaced identity common to both these novels is evident in many of the stories in these three volumes, particularly in 'Human Is', which neatly subverts the conventional scenario of a heroic astronaut returning home only for his wife to discover that he isn't who he appears to be - the theme of the recent Johnny Depp film, The Astronaut's Wife. Dick's treatment raises the question, what if the alien husband is an improvement on the original?

Although Dick was never a great prose stylist - many of these stories are clumsily constructed and his multi-viewpoint narratives, even in very short pieces, can be disconcerting - what makes them worthwhile is the wildness of his imagination and his antipathy to the conventions of mainstream 50s science fiction. Isaac Asimov's three laws of robotics, formulated in the previous decade, are not so much ignored by Dick, as deliberately turned upside down or exploded, particularly in stories such as 'The Defenders' in which robots collude with Earth's leader in lying about the fate of the Earth's surface; 'Sales Pitch' - a blackly comic tale which takes the sales demonstration to its ultimate conclusion - and the astonishing 'Second Variety', a novella in which the author's preoccupations with 'intelligent' weapons systems, minefields and genocide seem extraordinarily prescient.

Dick's protagonists are not heroes in the conventional sense of the term; instead they are little men - and they are, on the whole, male - confused, frightened, struggling to come to terms with worlds in which little can be taken at face value. Norman Spinrad rightly points out, in the introduction to the second volume, that while Dick eschewed the notion of consistency inherent in Heinlein's 'future history' stories or in the universe of Asimov's 'Foundation' series, his work in fact displays a much greater thematic unity in that certain ideas recur throughout the stories. The bleak and apocalyptic world view posited in 'Second Variety' is given a different slant in 'James P Crow' and 'Foster, You're Dead'; the notion of human freedom is undermined and threatened in 'Some Kinds of Life', 'War Veteran' and 'The Trouble with Bubbles'; the relationship between humans and ro-

bots is explored in 'To Serve the Master', 'Nanny' and 'The Last of the Masters', and concepts such as alienation, psychotropics as both a medium for escape and an agent of control, xenophobia, mental illness, fragmenting identities and the nuclear threat, are recurring themes that would be expanded, intensified and made more complex, in his later work. Make no bones about it, what these three volumes have to offer, is the chance to witness, in embryonic form, the paradigm shift in the SF genre, represented by subsequent works such as Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?, Martian Time-Slip, Dr Bloodmoney, A Scanner Darkly, and at least a dozen other innovative and superbly realised novels.

NON FICTION

FROM THE BEAST TO THE BLONDE

Vintage pb, 458pp, £10.99

NO GO THE BOGEYMAN

Vintage pb, 435pp, £10.99

Marina Warner

reviewed by Andrew Hook



MARINA WARNER

It would be impossible to imagine our world without fairy tales. Whether variations of Cinderella or Bluebeard or Sleeping Beauty these moral fables traverse geographical regions and religions as though a uni-

versal dogma. Often set dubiously in no specific time nor place they contain the eternal ability to remain applicable whether to the future or the past. In From the Beast to the Blonde Marina Warner goes some way to examine their origins and meanings in a persuasive prose style which entraps the reader much the same way as the tales can themselves.

This substantial cultural studies book bridges the gap between the every day enthusiastic fairy tale reader and the university scholar. Subtitled 'On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers' Warner supplies an informative, witty, elucidating analysis of the genre, beginning with a historical account of the largely female attributed tellers (sibyls, old crones, Mother Goose etc), and then expands this knowledge into the tales themselves. Undoubtedly she exposes fairy tales as a predominantly female genre. Males are resigned to being passive recorders outside the tale, or insipid princes and absent fathers within.

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Although the tales historically shift shape as much as some of the shape-shifters there-in, Warner condenses the basic function of a fairy tale as often being 'the arbiter of family relations and social order, conveying and instructing the audience, especially the young audience, in what is licit and illicit, what will earn praise and reward, and what will forfeit it."

She argues that this can be accomplished despite traditional perceptions of family structures being rent asunder. Like the mirror in Snow White the tales reflect the truth which is current to the time. The frequently swift departure of the birth mother becomes indicative of the fact that childbirth was the most common cause of female mortality. Whereas we may have lost some of the original context this has been replaced by an inherent acceptance of certain fairy tale criteria which has been established by the simple virtue of repetition.

It is this telling and re-telling of fairy tales which keeps them current. Warner acknowledges that 'the nature of the genre is promiscuous and omnivorous and anarchically heterogeneous, absorbing high and low elements, tragic and comic tones into its often simple, rondo-like structure of narrative.'

She additionally notes that whilst unpleasant themes run amok they are also anchored. Wicked stepmothers, beastly lovers, even incestuous fathers (in the now largely suppressed story, 'Donkeyskin') all have their role to play in reaffirming what is real within the fantasy. Lovingly told and lavishly illustrated this exhaustive work serves as a reminder that between childhood memory and subsequent mass-media exposure the fairy tale's heart lies in reiteration; and a conjuring of menaces in order to banish them from our own familiar world.



In her preface to No Go the Bogeyman Marina Warner explains that the impetus behind writing the book arose from queries as to why her earlier work, From the Beast to the Blonde, dwelt principally with fe-

male characters. In an attempt to redress the balance she was drawn towards the ostensibly male figure of the ogre, but then found gender not to be the central issue. Instead the book developed towards 'a cultural exploration of fear, its vehicles and its ambiguous charge of pleasure and pain.'

The book is split into three categories as indicated by its subtitle: scaring, lulling and making mock. Confident and determinedly expressive Warner moves effortlessly from biblical tales through lullabies and fairy tales to contemporary film where she introduces her concept of the 'late grotesque'. Movies such as those directed by Quentin Tarantino are seen as playing on audiences' expectations in order to mix the macabre with humour. To introduce 'a new kind of laughter, full of rancid sympathy.'

From historical perspective she explores

the cannibalistic nature of ogres and links this, not unsurprisingly, with the Catholic belief in transubstantiation. Utilising a multiplicity of sources the apparent similarities between good and evil are examined in depth leading to a thoughtful conclusion that a 'religious meaning attempts to purify cannibalism, to turn the pollution of anthropophagy into a means of salvation.'

The duality of lullabies follows on from this theme: that of the constant overlapping of laughter and fear (which might be considered the emotional embodiments of good and evil). Any mother crooning 'Hush a Bye Baby' to her child cannot fail to be puzzled by the close juxtaposition of safety and danger. A baby with the faculties to understand the lyrics would less likely be soothed than instilled with dread. It is the invocation of bogeymen as indiscriminate manifestations of otherworldliness which creates both a sense of unease yet also a wariness of the dangers of transgression. As Warner puts it succinctly: 'We need fear to know who we are and what we do not what to be.'

Laughter, or the expression of disbelief, has the power to overcome fear. In the final section of the book Warner considers how we use laughter to confront our bogeymen, to wither their potential effects. Ogres, though flesh-eaters, are exposed as being easily deceived even by dummlings; such as the eponymous Jack in the well-known beanstalk story. She continues her theme of the 'contradiction at the heart of human responses to fear: the processes by which people seek to undo enemy power simultaneously make it visible.

No Go the Bogeyman is more than a companion volume to From the Beast to the Blonde, it is an extensive and frequently compelling text in its own right. However, although Warner constantly pitches a convincing argument, the predominant academic nature of this impeccably researched book becomes occasionally tiring, and therefore it sometimes lacks the potentially universal appeal and specific focus of its predecessor.

GRAPHIC NOVELS

VEILS

Pat McGreal, Stephen John Phillips, Rebecca Guay, José Villarrubia, Aleksey Zolotaryov

Vertigo/DC, 95pp, \$14.95/£10 reviewed by Tim Lees

Like the British economy, the US comics industry - if you believe some sources is in constant turmoil and recession; which makes the occasional risk-taking venture from a mainstream company like Vertigo all the more welcome. The French can do what they like with graphic novels, but it seems that in the States, and by extension here, anything that breaks with proven formulae winds up with a big financial question mark over its head.

That said, the sales pitch for Veils is pretty

clear: the story of a nineteenth century Englishwoman's 'self-discovery' in an exotic eastern harem, complete with 'sensuous photography and digitally-created backgrounds' – presumably appealing to both porn-freak and technophile at the same time.

In fact, the result is much less prurient and a great deal more impressive than you might expect. The artwork, including the painted story-within-a-story, is truly gorgeous, and its stylised look ideally complements the fable-like nature of the tale. I'd recommend this book for the pictures alone, though anyone in search of titillation ought to look elsewhere.

If comics deal primarily in myths, the myth here is a familiar one, as our repressed Victorian forebears face the moral laxity of foreign climes and either retreat into their Englishness, or else go frighteningly native. Let me say right off that the characters come straight out of the communal stock-pot, and the plot, while there's mystery and intrigue enough to keep you reading on, holds only a few real surprises. Vivien, the heroine, is an initially dutiful wife whose inner strengths are liberated by the new environment; her husband, a Wodehouse drone, though with his sex drive still unpleasantly intact; his tyrannical father, a typical bewhiskered mad aristo. The 'veils' of the title are perhaps not so much those of Vivien's personality as of her conceptions of the world around; for nothing here is ever what it seems.

The book proves, in the end, not about sex at all, but about power, a more significant commodity; and the lesson is that power does not always lie where you suppose – as Lady Macbeth knew well. Cast as a historical piece, we nonetheless watch these events through late twentieth century eyes, with all the political perspective that implies, and a suitably open ending contrives to throw Vivien's own dilemma out into the real world for the reader to consider.

Well worth a look – and once again, the art is beautiful – but for those who want to see McGreal's story-telling at full throttle, track down the ten issues of *Chiaroscuro: The Private Lives of Leonardo da Vinci* (with David Rawson, Chas Truog and Rafael Kayanan), a well-known life viewed from an unfamiliar angle, and with a time-structure both brilliant and mind-boggling – the sort of comic that, had it been a film, would probably have won awards.

FILMS & VIDEO/DVD

BEING JOHN MALKOVICH Directed by Spike Jonze

Starring John Cusack, Cameron Diaz, Catherine Keener, Orson Bean, Mary Kay Place, John Malkovich. 113 minutes. Certificate 15. UK Cinema Release: 17 March reviewed by Gary Couzens

Craig Schwartz (John Cusack), an unemployed puppeteer, gets a job with a strange corporation based on the seventh-and-a half floor of a New York office building. One day,

behind a filing cabinet he finds a door – which leads into the head of the actor John Malkovich for fifteen minutes before dumping him on the side of the New Jersey Turnpike. Soon, Craig and his work colleague Maxine (Catherine Keener) are charging \$200 for a journey into Malkovich's head...

Musicvideo director Spike Jonze's dazzling feature debut starts off in Terry Gilliam territory (the seventh-and-a-half floor has very low ceilings, which means that all the staff have to bend double to walk down them) but soon moves off into its own direction. Charlie Kaufman's script is gleefully perverse: Craig's plain wife Lotte (Cameron Diaz) takes a trip into Malkovich's head and realises what's been missing from her life all along – she should have been a man. (You don't need me to point out the symbolism of entering someone via a portal.) That's before Lotte falls in love with Maxine, who up to now has rebuffed Craig's advances.

Unlike many musicvideo directors, Jonze doesn't indulge in flashy camerawork, the film being more visually drab than anything else. None of the major characters, except Malkovich, is very sympathetic, and Cusack and especially Diaz are deliberately deglamourised. Jonze reserves his visual flourishes for certain scenes: a chimp's-eye-view flashback with subtitles, and a truly bizarre setpiece when Malkovich enters his own head.

Being John Malkovich will be too rich and strange for some people, but if you can get onto its wavelength, it's a treat.

MAGNOLIA

Directed by Paul Thomas Anderson

Starring Jeremy Blackman, Tom Cruise, Melinda Dillon, Philip Baker Hall, William H. Macy, Julianne Moore. 189 minutes. Certificate 18. UK Cinema Release: 17 March (London), 24 March (wide)

reviewed by Gary Couzens

Paul Thomas Anderson made a big splash

with his second film, *Boogie Nights*. He's obviously highly talented, but as yet hasn't transcended his influences to find a voice of his own. If the Scorsese of *Goodfellas* was written all over *Boogie Nights*, in this highly ambitious follow-up he aspires to be Robert Altman, in particular the Altman of *Short Cuts*. (In this context, the casting of Altman regular Henry Gibson in a small role can hardly be accidental.)

After a short prologue which is a disquisition on the nature of fate and coincidence. Magnolia follows several characters whose destiny becomes interlinked over the course of one day. Earl Partridge (Jason Robards) is a dying man tended to by nurse Phil (Philip Seymour Hoffman) and whose much younger wife Linda (Julianne Moore) finds it hard to cope with his impending demise. Earl's estranged son, Frank Mackey (Tom Cruise), is a men's-group guru who runs seminars on how his audience of angry, frustrated men can get their way with women: 'Respect the Cock'. A religious cop, Jim (John C Reilly), gets involved with a highlystrung woman, Claudia (Melora Walters). Boy geniuses past (William H Macy) and present (Jeremy Blackman) find it difficult to cope. All of these plotlines are resolved by a bravura climax which replays one of the Biblical plagues of Egypt.

The film's reach is huge, and more than one viewing will probably be needed to take all of this in. Anderson's talent is not in doubt, but his discipline sometimes is: at three hours, *Magnolia* is simply too long, sometimes overwrought, and often veers into self-indulgence, but when it works, it does so very well. Tom Cruise turns in a striking performance, his best to date, but all the acting is top-notch.

Even if it doesn't entirely succeed, so much of *Magnolia* hits the spot as to make this a must-see.

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GUPTING GAMBALS

MARKMORUS



Sometimes I can almost convince myself that it never happened at all. Even though it's always there, like a chunk of glass embedded in my brain around which the tissue has grown snug and tight, I can make myself believe that it was a dream I once had or a story I made up.

Then there are other times when it seems as though what happened that summer was the *last* real thing that happened to me in my life, and that everything since has been a dream. The grief, the mental and physical disintegration of my parents, the long haul into lonely adulthood and the constant struggle with depression sometimes seem like nothing more than the sweaty, messy confusion of images that rush through your head just before you wake up.

Do you know what I'm saying here? Denial, I think they call it. Ever since that summer afternoon when I was ten years old I've spent my life in denial. I've tried to come up with ways of getting around what happened, of unravelling it, making it untrue. I'm at my happiest when I close my eyes in the dark and shut everything out and tell myself until I think I believe it that I am alone in the void, that the outside world is an illusion. Life and death, flesh and nature, beauty and despair, grief and decay, these are all concepts I've created to keep me amused, to while away eternity. Nothing bad has ever *really* happened nor ever will, because nothing and nobody exists beyond my imagination.

I know it's sad and unhealthy, I know I'm deluding myself, but knowing it doesn't mean I can make myself feel different. It goes without saying that I'm neither a happy person nor a well one. I've been in and out of institutions and on and off medication since the summer of '76. My brother, Joey, was twelve then. It was a hot summer, and I mean *hot*. Endless days of blistering white sunshine which, while enervating our mothers and fathers, energised us kids. For three months I didn't feel a breeze on my face; I'm not sure I even saw darkness. That summer was the cut-off point of my life, the last blaze of happiness before the onset of the blight that I've never managed to shake off.

We lived three miles outside Huddersfield at the time. There's a main road that snakes out of the town centre and climbs a very gentle incline until eventually it hits a round-about from which you can get on to the M62. For the first mile or two, the road — which even widens out to a dual carriageway here and there — meanders through some fairly built-up areas, but further on the houses become a little sparser, and where we lived, despite the proximity of the motorway, was actually fairly rural. There were lots of houses clustered in the vicinity of the road itself, like limpets clinging to an undersea pipeline, but surrounding the houses, and even dotted in amongst them, were — and probably still are — plenty of farms and fields and areas of woodland.

Joey and I lived with our parents in a three-bedroomed semi-detached house on a nice, quiet, lower-middle-class street, which was just far enough from the main road for us not to hear the traffic, and one side of which backed on to the junior school that I went to and that Joey had left the year before. Us kids — me and Joey, Dicky, Nige, Jonesie, Beany, Martin and Blackie — often went in to the school to doss about or into the adjoining YMCA playing fields to kick a football around or play cricket with no pads and a real corky ball. Or sometimes we would just lie and stare up at the sun, chomping stalks of grass and swallowing the sweet, tangy sap that burst from within, talking a bit but mostly listening to Joey holding forth, concocting plans and schemes for the rest of the holidays.

I was the youngest of this crowd, tolerated only because Joey was my brother. Joey was the leader of the gang. The others looked up to him because he was a bit reckless, a bit wild, because he buzzed with ideas and dared to go one step further than everyone else.

No one ever said out loud that he was our leader, but he ruled the roost all the same. If Joey didn't feel like doing something — playing football or cricket, say — then we wouldn't do it. Instead we'd do what Joey wanted — go down to the newsagents where he'd stuff dirty magazines up his jumper whilst the rest of us kept Mrs Lazaridis busy measuring out midget gems and butterscotch tablets; brave the perils of Dog Alley where a crazed Alsatian would snap and snarl and slaver mere inches from our faces on the end of its thick, taut chain; head into one of our dens in the woods for a smoke or a game of Commandos or Jumping the Stream, or sometimes rig up a swing on a stout tree branch and risk life and limb sailing out over the valley floor twenty-odd feet below.

Joey would do stuff that none of us other kids would ever dream of doing. Sometimes the stuff he did was brilliant and sometimes it was stupid, but even the stupid stuff impressed us because it invariably displayed a bravado that none of us would ever find in ourselves. And not only that but no matter how badly he hurt himself he'd always bounce back. Nothing put him off.

One of the brilliant things he did was standing up to Old Taylor, the school caretaker. It was early August, two weeks into the long school holidays, and we were all nicely into the summer groove. A bunch of us were in one of the pipes at school — concrete industrial cylinders that were cemented to the ground and were big enough to run through at a stoop. We weren't doing much, just talking, mucking about, idly planning a camping expedition that Joey reckoned we should all go on, when the sunlight streaming in through one end of the pipe was suddenly blotted out.

We turned to look and there, peering in, was the squat form of Old Taylor, accompanied by his yappy little dog. Taylor was a vicious, bad-tempered troll of a man, and his dog, small though it was, was every bit as mean as he was. All the kids at school were scared of him and his dog, and there were all sorts of rumours going around about him: he had been in prison for molesting kids (yeah, right, so they give him a job as a school caretaker); he had once tied up a kid he caught in the pipes and put him in the boot of his car and driven him to the police station and the kid had almost suffocated; he had been in the army during the war and had gone a bit mad and cut off the hands of all the Germans he killed and had worn them as war trophies around his belt (an addendum to this was that he still had the hands, all shrivelled up like old leather now, in a suitcase under his bed).

Anyway, all at once there he was, waving his stick and ranting on about trespass and police and criminal damage and bloody young hooligans. Panic lurched in my stomach and like everyone else I scrambled out of the other side of the pipe and began to run as fast as I could. We were so terrified of Taylor and his vicious little bastard of a dog that we left behind comics, cans of Coke, even a football. We were three-quarters of the way across the playground, almost at the safety barrier of the rough wooden fence that boundaried the school grounds from the YMCA playing fields when Blackie shouted, "Hey, he's got Joey!"

It was hot like I've said — the fields were little more than parched brown grass jutting from dusty earth baked hard as concrete — but in that moment something cold sluiced through me. My hairless balls contracted and crawled up into my belly and fear swarmed in my brain. I turned thinking, *Taylor's*

got him, Taylor's got him. The child-molesting German-killer has got my brother. And indeed when I turned there they were, the evil troll clutching my brother's wrist in one hand and brandishing his stick in the other, Joey straightening up, having evidently just crawled unhurriedly out of the pipe, the devil-dog capering and snapping round his ankles.

All six or seven of us thumped to a stop and turned to see what was happening. I'm sure if we'd wanted we could have rushed Taylor, but none of us dared take the initiative. If I'd been where Joey was I would have been thrashing and panicking, trying desperately to pull away, thinking of the kid tied up in the boot of the car, but Joey looked calm, even bored. Taylor waved his stick and cawed, "I've got you now, you bloody vandal."

Joey sighed and in a haughty voice that the still air carried clearly to us across the playground, he replied, "Oh, for fuck's sake, just let go of me, you silly little man."

Taylor went purple. His eyes bulged apoplectically and his mouth twisted in fury. He made a sort of strangled roaring sound and then he swung his stick towards Joey's head.

Joey's free hand sliced up and met Taylor's descending arm, jarring it and deflecting the blow. With one fluid balletic twist, he yanked his wrist from Taylor's grip, grabbed the stick and wrenched it out of the old man's hands. He placed the tip of the stick on the ground at a forty-five degree angle and stamped on the centre of it. The stick, a varnished and polished cane with a metal grip in the shape of a horse's head, splintered into two pieces. Joey stepped neatly backwards as Taylor lunged for him and gobbed a big greeny right into the caretaker's face. And when Taylor's vicious little dog went for him, Joey stepped back, swung his foot and booted it across the playground.

He ran towards us then, dribbling the football we'd left behind and grinning all over his face. God, I loved my brother, I worshipped him, and I knew from the way the other guys treated him that they worshipped him almost as much as I did. Taylor never bothered us again after that and less than a year later he was gone, replaced by a younger man with curly hair and a moustache who didn't mind kids mucking about in the pipes and on the playground out of school hours just so long as they didn't damage anything or cover the walls with graffiti.

But of course by the time Taylor went away — died or retired, resigned or sacked, I don't know — the summer was long past and the wonderful life that I'd had, basking in the warmth of my brother's glory, was over. I'd sometimes see some of the other guys hanging around together — after all, we all lived within a couple of streets of each other, so it was only natural — but it never seemed the same, even for them. I don't know what a single one of them are doing now, and to be honest I don't care. Strange that the people who were with me that day, with whom I shared the single, most fundamental experience of my life, are no longer important to me — or maybe it's not strange at all. Sometimes when people share something that shakes their world, it becomes too painful to stay together afterwards. You look into their eyes and see your own pain, and feel torn between the need to share that pain and the need to bury it deep. Or you see indifference, which is worse, because it diminishes both the significance of the event itself and the worth of your own emotions.

I guess I *must* have spoken to the other guys afterwards, but if so it was only on a basic level. I suppose we nodded and said hi when we passed on the street or in the school corridor, but I never had what you might call a real conversation with any of them. Certainly we never spoke about



what happened, and not a single one of them ever asked me how I was feeling. Not that I cared too much to be honest. I came to dread the question from well-meaning adults. I suppose, like I've said, it was simply too raw a wound to probe into. The guys avoided me (and to some extent each other) and I guess I avoided them.

I've told you about the brilliant way Joey dealt with Old Taylor, and about how much I loved and worshipped him, but I'm not too blind to realise that my brother was far from perfect. He was no delinquent, but sometimes he got so buzzy, so hyperactive, that he overstepped the mark. He had what you might call a blind spot; sometimes he couldn't foresee the consequences of his actions. It got so that on occasion he couldn't tell right from wrong, fantasy from reality. Maybe there was something wrong with his brain, I don't know. If there was it was never diagnosed. What I'm trying to say is that although Joey never did anything with evil intent, some of the stuff he *did* do nevertheless ended up *looking* mean or sometimes just plain dumb.

For instance, there was this old widow who lived at the top of our street — Mrs Makins. Joey once sneaked round the back of her house, took off all his clothes, put a Mickey Mouse mask on and then stood tapping on her back window with a stick until she opened the curtains. He said he thought it would be a laugh, told me he thought that maybe *she'd* get a laugh out of it, but she didn't, of course. She called the police, and ended up having such a bad turn that she had to be given oxygen. The only reason Joey wasn't caught was because she said it was a fully grown man who had been standing there. It was in all the papers and everything.

And then there was another time — a winter's night this was — when Joey nicked a can of petrol from the local garage, took it into the subway that ran under the main road and dropped a match into it. Immediately a thin column of flame

Anyway, all at once there he was, waving his stick and ranting on about trespass and police and criminal damage and bloody young hooligans. Panic lurched in my stomach and like everyone else I scrambled out of the other side of the pipe and began to run as fast as I could

whooshed up from the mouth of the can, singeing Joey's fringe and eyebrows and giving his face a mottled reddish look for a week or so afterwards. The four or five of us who were there that night turned to run, and had got no more than half a dozen steps when the bloody thing exploded. The bang was incredible (the wax in my ears seemed to vibrate and itch for hours afterwards), as was the wave of heat that bowled into our backs as we scarpered. Jonesie, who was at the rear of the group, got hit by a piece of shrapnel, which slashed right through his jacket, sweater and shirt just below his shoulder blade and nicked the flesh beneath. We ran down the hill and into the patch of woodland at the bottom and lay low for a while, me trying to hide the fact that I was trembling with terror at what we had done, Joey giggling uncontrollably. When we went back later, there was a fire engine there, the firemen dousing down the last of the flames. I remember looking into the subway from the other side of the road and it was like a gigantic chimney, caked with soot, dripping with black water. Believe it or not, Joey actually walked across the road and said to one of the firemen, "What happened here then, mister?" And the fireman turned to him, face black as a coal miner's, and said, "Looks like some idiot set fire to a petrol can. Could have brought the whole ceiling down on them. We've had to close off the road in case it collapses."

I can see my brother now, shaking his head as if unable to comprehend the stupidity of the act and muttering, "Some people." He never showed any remorse for his actions, though. When I brought it up later he just grinned and said, "No harm done, Ricardo. And it made a hell of a bang, didn't it?"

My name isn't really Ricardo, it's Richard; Ricardo is just what Joey called me. Richard Bentley, if it helps. Might save a bit of legwork later, at any rate. I'm a sales rep for Havistock's, the cleaning products company, who make Mr Gleam,

All That Glitters, Scrub-A-Dub, that kind of stuff. Hence the boxes of samples in the back of the car in case you were wondering. I travel a lot naturally, so I get to be on my own most of the time, which suits me. Gives me an excuse for avoiding anything deeper than surface relationships at any rate.

That day, August 23rd 1976, began just like any other that summer. The sun bleached the colour from the earth, the bluest sky you've ever seen filled the world, dogs panted, bees droned, people sweated.

We called our gang the Scramblers, because most of us had Scrambler bikes. Not all of us — Blackie and Dicky had Choppers (it really was a more innocent age back then. Can you imagine a kid's bike with the word CHOPPER emblazoned across it nowadays?), and Beany had this rickety old thing that looked as though it might have been used by his grandmother to go shopping before cars were invented.

Joey's Scrambler was purple and mine was blue. We would all line up at the top of our drive, which, though short, was on quite a steep incline and which curved down like an inverted question mark, and then Joey would shout, "Scramblers are go!" whereupon we would sweep down the drive and on to the pavement, imagining ourselves as fighter pilots in deadly formation.

We had decided to take some sandwiches and spend that day in the woods. To get to the woods we had to cycle down to the main road, go through the subway that crossed beneath it — the same subway that Joey had almost blown up nine months before and whose fresh coat of bright white paint had since been scarred with graffiti, some of it ours — and then down a steep, rutted road lined with cottages and flanked by farm land to the first cluster of trees at the bottom.

There was nothing remarkable about the start of the day, nothing to set it apart from any other, except maybe for our meeting with the witch. Well, she wasn't really a witch, just some mad old woman who was hobbling along the pavement, drooling into her basket of shopping. As we swept past her on our bikes, her head snapped up and she pointed a long bony finger at our jeans and shrieked, "Ooh, ooh, ooh, blue, blue!" Quick as a flash, Joey twisted in his seat and pointed back at her, and as if she had fed him the first line of a rhyme, chanted, "You are just a silly moo."

At the corner shop on the far side of the main road just above the subway entrance, we virtually fell off our bikes, breathless with laughter. We relived the incident, with increasing hilarity, several times over as kids do, then we went into the shop for some sweets ('spogs' we called them back then — don't ask me why). We bought white chocolate mice and Black Jacks, red liquorice bootlaces and Bazooka Joe bubble gum. Five minutes later Beany came off his rickety old bone shaker when his back wheel slewed as he picked up speed going downhill, tipping him over the handlebars. We laughed at his torn jeans and his bloody knee and his rueful expression. We laughed again moments later when, at the bottom of the hill, Martin — who was six feet tall at the age of eleven, as well as bespectacled and ginger-haired (how unlucky can a kid get?) — blew a Bazooka Joe bubble that burst all over his face, coating his glasses and leaving him with a sticky pink film on his fringe and eyebrows.

We had already decided to head over to Den Number Two to eat our sarnies. To do this we had to cycle deep into the woods along a baked earth track made treacherous both by potholes and the tips of buried rocks which jutted from the ground as if their sole purpose was to buckle wheels and spill unwary kids over the handlebars of their wounded bikes.

An aside: earlier in the year, when the ground was softer, me, Joey, Blackie and Nige, had made it our mission to dig one of these rocks out of the earth. We used sharp stones and our fingers to exhume the bugger, which was about the size of a new-born baby. It took us the best part of an hour, and when we finally tugged it free it took two of us to lift it. The pothole it left behind was so massive that a kid would have to have been blind as a worm to accidentally ride his bike into it.

Joey and Nige ended up standing on the edge of the valley holding the rock between them. They swung it back and forth a few times and then let go. Their aim was perfect. The rock arced out into the air, turning slowly, almost gracefully, like a high diver, before plummeting to the ground and landing in the busy stream below with an incredible *SPLA-DOOSH!* I swear that the stream was so shocked by what had hit it that for a few seconds the water stopped flowing.

"Ace! Fucking ace!" Nige yelled, rubbing his hands together, which were a little raw where the rock had been rubbing on them. Joey just grinned, his eyes alive with that familiar sparkle, that familiar *glitter*. Maybe he *was* mad. Who knows? As kids you do mad things all the time, things that you become baffled by when, as adults, you see kids doing the same kind of dumb stuff that you used to do.

Den Number Two comprised of a hollow that had been gouged from the far side of the valley wall, but which you couldn't see because of the thick, weedy foliage until you were right up next to it. The hollow had been caused by a large and ancient tree falling across the valley at some time in the past. Most of the tree had been taken away, but the stump was still there, some of its tentacular roots, thick as my arm, buried deep into the hillside, maybe dead, maybe still sucking up whatever nourishment they could to feed the truncated body above.

The tree must have been massive, because the tallest of us could stand in the hollow behind the stump and not be seen. In fact, when we sat in the hollow — and eight of us could do so quite comfortably — the bottom of the stump acted as both a wall and the beginnings of a ceiling. Gnarled roots curled up and over us like snakes which had once writhed on the now petrified head of some mythical god. It didn't provide much shelter from the rain, but it did provide shade from the sun.

By the time we reached it, leaving our bikes in a tangle of wheels and handlebars in the foliage below, we were dusty, parched and hungry. Jonesie, who always sweated a lot, had huge dark patches under the arms of his khaki T-shirt and a dark wet diamond radiating out from the centre of his chest.

We all opened cans of Coke and Seven-Up and fell silent for a few seconds as we drank deeply. The pop wasn't as cold as when we'd started out — in fact, it was almost warm - but it was welcoming nonetheless. After the drinking came the inevitable round of belching and then the ceremonial unwrapping and comparing of sandwiches, all of which were now a little worse for wear. Me and Joey had peanut butter and strawberry jam, Jonesie had corned beef and Daddies sauce, Martin had cheese spread that left little crusty yellow stains, like dried pus, at the sides of his mouth, and Nige had one of his usual weird combinations — cheese and marmalade it might have been, or chocolate spread and crisps, or sausage and banana. I can't remember what the others had, and maybe it's not really important, except that when I look back on that day with hindsight, everything, every little detail, seems loaded with significance, burdened

I was chewing a mouthful of sandwich and watching a ladybird amble up my left forefinger and down the other side There was this old widow who lived at the top of our street

— Mrs Makins. Joey once sneaked round the back of her house, took off all his clothes, put a Mickey Mouse mask on and then stood tapping on her back window with a stick until she opened the curtains

when Joey said, "Tell them what you told me about them cannibals, Ricardo."

The ladybird's back cracked open as it unfolded its wings and whirligigged away from the tip of my finger. I blinked up at my brother, the sun shining over his shoulder, stretching fingers of light across his face, blotting out his features.

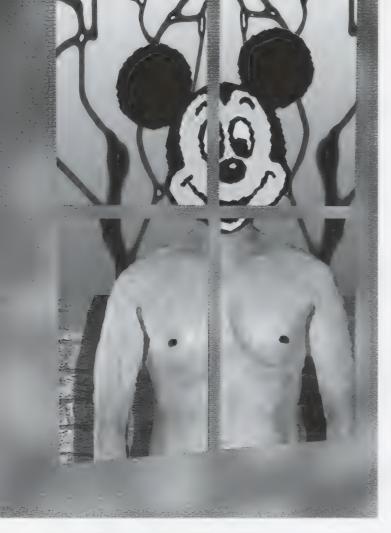
I always felt a bit self-conscious addressing the group, because I knew — being a mere ten years old to their twelve — that they didn't take me as seriously as they took each other. As casually as I could, however, I said, "I saw this programme about these cannibals in Africa the other day, and they reckon that if they eat the heart of their enemy they, like, inherit his strength and so they become twice as strong, and if they eat the heart of an animal that they've killed they take on whatever's, like, good about that animal."

From the corner of my eye I saw Jonesie and Blackie staring at me, their faces blank, unimpressed, and what little confidence. I'd had to start with began to falter. I knew I wasn't explaining myself very well or doing justice to the programme I'd seen. Joey picked up a stick and whacked it idly against the bottom of the tree. "Tell them about the bloke what ate the spider, and that one what ate the tiger's heart," he prompted.

"Yeah, there was this one bloke who caught this massive tarantula, and he twisted its legs behind its back and put this piece of wood on its fangs so it couldn't bite him or squirt poison at him. Then he put it on this rock and squashed its head with this pointed stick, and then he squeezed its body and all this jelly-stuff squirted out on to this leaf."

Joey banged his stick against the roots of the tree again, the sound of impact sharp and clear in the summer air. "Eggs," he said with relish.

I nodded. "Yeah, it was a female spider and it was full of eggs. The bloke baked the spider and ate it and then he



cooked the eggs and made, like, a little omelette out of them and ate that as well. He reckoned it would give him the ability to hunt like a tarantula."

I could see that the guys were interested now, and with more than a little satisfaction I noted that Martin even looked a bit ill. He tossed the last of his cheese spread sandwich into the stream below. "Thanks, Rich," he said. "That's just what I wanna hear when I'm eating my lunch. If I need to puke later I'll make sure I do it on your head."

"It was Joey who wanted me to tell you," I protested.

"Aw, ignore him, Ricardo. He's just a big puff. Tell us about the bloke what ate the tiger."

"Well, he didn't eat a *whole* tiger," I said, enjoying myself now. "He just ate its heart. It showed him cutting it up and cutting its heart out and everything. It was really disgusting. There was blood all over the place."

"Did he cook it?" Dicky asked.

I shook my head, feeling a warm wave of pleasure wriggling through me as I anticipated the response I was going to get. "No, he ate it raw. He was holding it in his hands with all this blood running down his arms and just taking massive great bites out of it."

To my immense delight the guys responded accordingly, their noises of disgust causing a few nearby birds to take off in fright. Joey grinned and said, "Yeah, but later on the bloke went mad, didn't he, Ricardo?"

"Yeah, they had to lock him in this hut because he was roaring and attacking people. All these tribal elders or whatever said that the spirit of the tiger was too strong for him and that he couldn't control it. He had to stay in this hut for, like, four days without any food or water until he'd quietened down."

"And then what happened?" asked Beany, rubbing saliva into his skinless knee.

"Then they let him out. He had all these, like, scabs round his mouth and his eyes were all funny, but I think he was okay in the end."

"Oh, wow, sounds brill," said Nige. "I wish I'd seen it." "Me too," said Blackie.

"Yeah, but if these blokes were meant to be cannibals," said Jonesie, the dour pragmatist of the group, "how come they were eating spiders and tigers and stuff? Didn't it show them eating any people?"

I shook my head. "No, I don't think they could find enough of them in the jungle, so they had to eat other stuff. I think if they had, like, a battle with another tribe then they'd kill and eat all the prisoners. It didn't show it, though."

"How come they didn't eat the cameraman and all them lot making the film?" asked Nige.

"Don't be a div," said Blackie, who had a pudding basin haircut that made him resemble a small, blond-haired version of Bully Beef from the Dandy. "You can't go around eating blokes from the BBC, especially not English ones. If they'd eaten any English blokes they'd have been arrested and put in prison for murder."

"Not in their own country they wouldn't," said Beany.

"Yes they would."

"No, they wouldn't. It's their culture, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but English laws protect English people, so if any English people get murdered whoever did it has to be tried by an English court."

"That's bollocks," said Jonesie laconically.

"No it isn't."

"Yes it is."

The argument spiralled on, not exactly heatedly but vociferously. It's funny how, as adults, most of us lose the ability to argue, even with our friends. We become burdened by convention and inhibition, we loathe confrontation and put up with all sorts of shit just to avoid it. We lose so much just by growing up. That day, although I didn't know it then, listening to them all arguing about nothing in particular, I lost everything.

The only two people not arguing were me and Joey. Me because I felt too intimidated to join in, Joey because he was somehow above it all; he observed the conflict with a kind of amused condescension, like a higher life form might observe the bickering of primates. He caught my eye and gave me a secret smile, and immediately it elevated me, made me feel superior too. We finished our lunch and then Joey abruptly announced, "I'm off up to Lazza's. Nige, do you want to come with me?"

He did this every so often, just announced that he was going off somewhere. No one ever protested. It was an unspoken rule that if Joey went off, then the rest of the guys just hung around and waited for him to come back. Sometimes he took someone else with him — usually Nige, because, although no one ever said the words out loud, Nige was his best mate. He never asked me to go with him. I'm not entirely sure why. Maybe it was because he saw enough of me at home, or maybe he thought it would be good for me, leaving me alone with the other guys a bit, or maybe he wanted me there because he knew that none of the other guys would start to slag him off with me around.

I was more or less ignored when Joey wasn't there, which was why I always carried a book around with me. When Joey left I would casually produce my book and start to read, hoping it would give me an air of aloofness, make the other guys feel that their company was not scintillating enough to sustain me.

I remember the book I was reading that day so clearly. In

fact, I still have it and have brought it with me today. It's in the breast pocket of my grey jacket, nestling against my heart. It was only a kid's book of ghost stories — the 8th Armada Ghost Book, to be precise — but like I said before, every detail about that day now seems to me portentous somehow. The cover of the book depicts a drowning boy with a rowing boat bearing down on him, at the prow of which stands a skeletal death-figure, trying to ensnare him in a ragged net.

Corny? Maybe so. But there's a part of me that can't help wondering whether significant future events cast shadows back in to our present into whose darkness we fall without realising. Perhaps we pick up clues that are all too often too subtle to be interpreted correctly.

Or perhaps I'm talking out of my arse. God knows, I've done enough of that in the past twenty-odd years.

Joey and Nige were gone for about forty-five minutes. When they reappeared on the dirt track between the trees they were both carrying something — Nige a large bottle of what looked like water, and Joey some sort of glossy tube.

"Wait till you see what we've got," Nige shouted as he scrambled up the side of the valley towards Den Number Two. Joey just smiled indulgently.

What they'd got turned out to be a large bottle of vodka and a quartet of wank mags that they'd pilfered from Mrs Laziridis's off-license. Joey unrolled the tube of mags he had been carrying in his hand and dealt them out magnanimously: Fiesta, Penthouse, Forum, Men Only. I hastily put my book away — the skeletal boatman seemed childish in comparison — and visually lapped up the naked female flesh with the other guys. We all made manly comments about what we'd do to these girls given half the chance, though in truth if any woman had suddenly appeared and offered herself to us, we'd all have panicked and run a mile.

Joey unscrewed the vodka bottle and offered it round. Naturally we all took a swig as though it was something we did every day, though I'd be willing to bet that most of those guys had never even sniffed vodka before. When it was Dicky's turn his eyes widened as if he'd swallowed fire, then he began to cough and wheeze, his eyes and nose streaming. Of course, we all mercilessly took the piss out of him, even though when it was my turn I merely allowed the vodka to slosh against my closed lips before handing it on and tried not to react to the slight stinging sensation on my mouth.

I guess that a few of the other guys did what I'd done too, because when the bottle got back to Joey it was still virtually full. Joey made no comment, merely tilted his head back and gulped several mouthfuls of the stuff as though it was water. I watched with a mixture of envy and horror, half-expecting to see a delayed reaction like in the cartoons, a few seconds of calm followed by his face abruptly turning crimson and steam jetting out of his ears. However if the vodka did burn Joey's throat and stomach he didn't show it; his eyes didn't even water. He merely passed the bottle round again and all the guys took a swig — or pretended to — except for Dicky, who was big enough to refuse it.

In this way the vodka got drunk, the entire contents of the bottle disappearing in less than half an hour. I would guess that Joey drank at least half of it, if not more. Nige and Jonesie drank enough to get tipsy, and the rest of us either faked it or consumed negligible amounts.

Joey didn't *seem* particularly drunk, though his glittering eyes adopted a strange cast. "Come on," he said as soon as the empty bottle had been lobbed into the stream below, "we're going."

"Where to?" I asked him.



He pointed upstream, to where the woods thickened for a mile or two before ending at a dry stone wall that marked the boundary of the local golf course. "Tiger country," he said. "We're going to bag us some big game."

Beany gave him a strange look. "There aren't any tigers in England."

I shuddered at the expression on Joey's face as he looked at Beany, and even now find it hard to describe. His eyes were vacant and yet somehow burning. He had never shown even the remotest flash of violence, and yet there were times when you wondered uneasily just what he might be capable of. Quietly he said, "If you want something badly enough, you'll find it. Remember that, Beany."

It was obvious that Beany was unsettled by Joey's response, but he tried to dismiss it with a shrug. "All right," he muttered. "Suppose it'll give us something to do any way."

"If we do find a tiger," said Nige with apparent seriousness, "how will we kill it?"

Joey merely smiled and tapped the side of his head.

We tramped down the side of the valley, retrieved our bikes, crossed the bridge and set off along the other side where there was a track of sorts. Coins of sunlight showered down on us through the trees. To our left, twenty or thirty feet below, the stream sparkled like a bejewelled path. I watched my brother's back as he pedalled his bike ahead of me and wondered what his plan was, or whether he even had one. Was this so-called 'tiger hunt' a game or did he have something else in mind?

I never *did* find out, not that I suppose it really mattered. Certainly what happened could not have been planned. Joey couldn't have known what we would find on the path ahead. At first I thought it was some kind of wrapper that had been stamped into the ground, a loose end of paper flapping in the breeze. I think it took me several seconds to remember that

I watched Joey eat it, saw his jaw champ down twice as he ground and softened the flesh, saw blood squeeze out between his teeth and trickle over his lips, saw his eyes flutter and his Adam's Apple bob as he swallowed

there was no breeze, and hadn't been for days, weeks even.

With that realisation came another: the thing lying on the track ahead of us was a bird. And the flapping end of what I had thought was paper was in fact a frantically beating wing.

Horror, revulsion, and — yes — a thrill of excitement went through me. The sight of the bird struggling for life was certainly grotesque and pitiful, but the thrill came from a boyish fascination with violence and death, and from the fact that it was not every day you encountered a creature in mortal peril. Even from ten or fifteen feet away it seemed plain that the bird was broken beyond repair. How much agony did flapping its wing cause it, I wondered. Was its pain less than its mortal terror? Did birds even *feel* mortal terror? And did the creature honestly believe that if it flapped its wing hard enough it would fly again?

Suddenly I found myself wishing we hadn't found the bird. Suddenly I felt bad for it. There was nothing to be done, however: I would have felt just as bad had we gone away and left it to its suffering.

There were cries from the others, not exactly of delight but certainly of excited discovery. Bikes were dropped and we all ran to the bird and surrounded it, Nige and Jonesie dropping down on to their haunches. It was a crow or a rook, some sort of big black bird at any rate, with a yellow beak which was partly open as if it was gasping for breath. The eye that I could see was open and glaring. I wondered if it was aware of our presence. To me, it looked utterly terrified. Its body was puffing up then deflating very fast, as if its heart was racing like an engine. It looked capable of dying at any moment; I imagined its heart literally bursting with fright.

"What's wrong with it?" Dicky asked.

Jonesie looked up at him, face red and sweaty, eyes squinting. "How should I know? I'm not a vet."

"Maybe a cat got it," suggested Martin.

"Nah," said Beany, "no blood. When our cat gets something there's always blood."

"Your cat's a fucking nutjob," said Nige. "It doesn't just kill birds, it rips their fucking wings off and everything."

"That's true," said Beany almost proudly. "Leaves the bits all over the house."

"Well, if a cat *didn't* get it, why's it hurt?" I asked. I didn't often contribute unless prompted, but something about the way we were standing around discussing the situation, even veering slightly off the subject, while this poor thing fluttered and flapped in agony before us, offended my sensibilities.

Martin glanced up at the trees, his ginger hair gleaming like copper. "Maybe it fell out of a nest."

"Don't be a spaz," retorted Nige. "It's a bird. Birds don't fall, they fly."

"Maybe it was as leep," said Martin, "and it turned over in its sleep and - " $\,$

"It's had it," Joey said.

He spoke softly, but he might just as well have shouted. His voice cut through Martin's bluster with ease. For a second none of us said or did anything. There was a strange finality to Joey's words.

Then a little uncertainly Nige said, "Maybe we can take it to a vet. It might just have a broken wing."

"It's had it," Joey repeated, steel underlying the velvet of his voice. Nige looked anxious, but he sort of shifted back a bit from the bird as if allowing Joey access. Jonesie did the same.

I don't know if any of us expected what happened next. Before we could prevent it or even say anything, Joey stepped forward and stamped his foot down hard on the bird's head. There was an awful crunch, like the sound of Dad cracking walnuts at Christmas, and a dark red froth of what I can only assume were pulped brains shot out of the bird's beak.

We all jumped back, cries of revulsion bursting from us. Dicky tottered to the side of the valley as if punch-drunk, leaned over and was sick into the weeds and the grass. No one took the piss out of him this time. We were all too sickened ourselves. I loved my brother but at that moment I hated him for what he had done.

The other guys seemed to feel pretty much the same. Certainly I had never seen them react to anything he had done in the past so vehemently.

"What did you do that for?" Nige all but screamed.

"You bastard!" gasped Martin.

Joey looked at his friends with a glazed, bemused expression as if he couldn't comprehend their anger. Shrugging he said, "I put it out of its misery."

"We might have saved it," wailed Nige.

"No." Joey shook his head. "It couldn't be saved."

"How the fuck do you know?" Blackie said.

Before Joey could reply, Dicky said, "I'm going home." He walked over to his bike, picked it up and began to wheel it slowly away.

I expected one of the others to call him back, but no one did. Blackie glanced at Joey, then looked down at the ground and scuffed it with the toe of his trainers, causing a little cloud of pale brown dust to puff up into the air. At last he muttered, "I'm going too." Then he abruptly turned round, grabbed his bike and ran after Dicky, eventually catching him up and falling into step beside him.

Joey had an amused half-smile on his face as he watched them go. Then he turned back to the bird and nudged its now motionless body with his foot. "It's at peace now."

Nige sighed and straightened up. "Come on," he said, "let's go."

"Not yet," said Joey. "I haven't finished here yet."

Jonesie frowned, suspicious and wary. "What do you mean?"

Joey's voice was eerily odd and flat, almost ethereal. "I killed the bird. I'm entitled to its spirit."

I saw Jonesie and Nige flash each other a look of anxiety, even dread.

"What you on about?" Beany said.

Joey cast about until he found a sharp, jagged chunk of rock. Beany glanced at the others and licked his lips. "What you gonna do?"

I think we all knew. We just didn't want to admit it. As Joey walked over to the bird and squatted down beside it, the chunk of rock in his hand, Nige said a little desperately, "Hey, come on, let's leave this and go and have a game of footy. We can call round at my house. My mum's got loads of ice pops in the freezer."

Joey ignored him. Carefully he turned the bird over on to its back and spread its wings out.

"Don't touch it, Joey," Beany said. "It'll be full of fleas."
Joey shuffled forward until he was squatting astride the
bird, one foot on each of its outstretched wings.

"Come on, Joey, leave it alone, it's dead," Nige whined. With one sharp jabbing motion, Joey punctured the bird's chest with his stone.

"Fucking hell!" yelled Martin. He turned and then actually began to run away, following the direction that Dicky and Blackie had taken. He ran, in that awkward, long-limbed way of his, as if the crazed Alsatian from Dog Alley was loose and pounding after him. In a way I understood his panic, his desire to put as much distance as possible between himself and the sick, buzzing insanity of what was going on here.

Beany put a hand over his mouth, his eyes wide with disbelief. Nige said, "Oh, disgusting," almost quietly, and stepped back, his face horrified but, like the rest of us that were left, unable to tear his eyes away from what Joey was doing. Jonesie didn't say anything. His face was tight, lips pursed, like a disapproving school ma'am.

Thin, brownish blood squirted up and over Joey's hand. Undeterred, he continued to hack at the bird's chest.

His face was grim, concentrated, as he sliced and chopped away, reducing the bird's glossy plumage to a ragged, sodden mess. I had a thin, high buzzing in my ears, more constant than the drone of the bees. The chopping seemed to go on for an unbearably long time until at last Joey's fixed expression changed to one of glee. He tossed the bloodied stone aside, reached into the bird's chest with the thumb and first two fingers of his right hand until they were buried up to the first knuckle, and pulled out his plum.

The bird's heart was nothing special, a crimson, dripping blob of flesh with red, stringy bits trailing from it. Nevertheless the four of us who had remained to witness the partial evisceration stared at it, mesmerized. No one said anything. Events had progressed to such a point where words were inadequate, pointless. The only sound any of us made was that of Beany retching as he turned away, covering his face with his hand, when Joey put the heart in his mouth.

I watched Joey eat it, saw his jaw champ down twice as he ground and softened the flesh, saw blood squeeze out between his teeth and trickle over his lips, saw his eyes flutter and his Adam's Apple bob as he swallowed.

Then it was over, and Joey was doubling over, gasping as if for breath. Blood dripped from his lips on to the ground, each individual drop becoming instantly coated with dust. He spat and the bloody phlegm that emerged was ambushed by dust too. Finally he straightened, threw his head back and

"I can feel the bird's spirit inside me. Already I feel my eyes getting sharper. It's working." He almost hissed out this last word, and indeed his eyes did suddenly look more alive than they had all afternoon. For a crazy second I believed my brother really had ingested the spirit of the bird

swiped a suntanned arm across his bloody lips.

"How you feeling?" Nige asked.

Joey nodded, regaining his composure admirably quickly. "Strong."

Beany, still looking as though he was on the verge of throwing up, regarded him as if he had two heads. "What did it taste like?"

Joey now seemed incredibly calm, almost somnolent. "It's like nothing I've ever tasted before."

"I bet it makes you puke," said Jonesie.

Joey shook his head. "No. I can feel the bird's spirit inside me."

Uneasily Jonesie said, "Don't talk daft."

"Already I feel my eyes getting sharper. It's working."

He almost hissed out this last word, and indeed his eyes did suddenly look more alive than they had all afternoon. For a crazy second I believed my brother really had ingested the spirit of the bird.

Then my thoughts were thrown into turmoil as he unexpectedly let loose a shrill, bird-like screech and sprinted towards the edge of the path.

"No!" Nige yelled. "Joey, no!" But it was too late. Joey spread his arms as if they were wings and launched himself out over the valley. For an instant he seemed to hang in the air, to ride the thermals. Then his body tipped forward, his arms flapped, and he plunged head-first to the ground.

It was a drop of about twenty-five feet, and if he had landed in the boggy weeds surrounding the stream, or even in the water itself, he might have been okay. He didn't, though. He came down head-first on one of several large rocks that were jutting out of the undergrowth. There was a dreadful sound of impact, not unlike the sound the bird's skull had made when Joey had stepped on it, but louder — and wetter. His head seemed to cave in, then his body folded and somer-



saulted and twistedly hit the water with a splash.

I looked down, and I guess I was so stunned that for several long moments I felt oddly calm. I remember methodically taking in all the details: the bloody, lumpy stuff on the rock that I guessed were the contents of my brother's head; the way his body looked strangely boneless and twisted out of true as it lay in the water; the ribbon of blood winding almost lazily downstream.

It was Beany who jerked me from my state of shocked immobility. He screamed and staggered back from the edge of the valley, fell over, got up, walked in a quick circle with his hand over his mouth, then — like Martin before him — simply ran away, leaving his bike behind, his legs pumping so fast that he almost stumbled over twice before disappearing from view.

Nige was alternately covering his eyes with his hands and peering into the stream below, murmuring, "ohnoohnoohnoohno," over and over again. Jonesie simply stared, face slack and stunned, body slightly slumped like a man under the influence at a hypnotist's show.

Beany's scream had kick-started a kind of panicked urgency inside me. I felt scared and sick, yes, but all that seemed partly screened by a rushing of adrenaline through my veins, a need to *do* something. I may have been gibbering, calling out my brother's name — I'm not sure. What I do remember is lowering myself over the side of the valley, clutching handfuls of weeds as I slithered down.

My feet sank to their ankles in the sludge at the bottom from which jutted long spiky grass that jabbed and pricked at my legs up to the thighs even through my jeans. I waded towards my brother as if in a nightmare, the ground sucking at my feet, trying to drag me back. When I reached the stream itself and staggered into it, I was wheezing asthmatically, coated in sweat.

The water, reaching to just below my knees, was shockingly cold and quite fast-flowing. I remember almost falling over. Remember looking up and seeing my brother who was lying in the water six or eight feet away waving to me, until I realised that it was the current that was making his arms and legs sway languidly. I remember splashing towards him, reaching his body, grabbing one sodden jean-leg and pulling him towards me. His body came easily, floating like a log.

After that it's all a blur.

I think what happened was that I must have seen what damage the rock had done to his head, whereupon my mind just checked out.

I'm told that when they found me (I guess Nige or Jonesie must have gone for help) I was sitting in the stream, shivering, clinging limpet-like to my brother's legs. Apparently it took several burly policemen to prise me from Joey's body and then to restrain me as I kicked and screamed and writhed and bit. For a long time I wouldn't talk to anybody. Apparently it was days before I spoke even a single word.

For a while I regressed. I went back to being a baby again. I assume it was the only way I could cope with what had happened. To be honest, I remember very little of the time immediately following Joey's death. Apparently I wouldn't eat or drink, I gave no indication of when I needed the toilet and eventually had to be put back in nappies, and I had terrible nightmares from which I would wake up screaming and crying.

For Mum and Dad it must have been like losing two sons, because, as I've said, I never really got over my brother's death. I blame myself, of course I do. Looking back, I see many points at which I could have prevented what was going to happen. I wished it was me who'd died and not Joey. He had far more to offer the world than I ever will. I'm thirty-two years old now, but I'm still ten inside my head. To me, Joey's death is still a fresh tragedy. It's the first thing I think about every day when I wake up, and every day it grinds me down.

Well, no more. I don't know why it's taken me so long to reach this inevitable point, but here I am. I've been sitting here in my car for hours. A few people have tramped up the windy cliff-top path, singly or in pairs or with dogs, but not one of them has come over to ask me what I'm doing or if I'm okay. Maybe, deep down, they recognise that a balance has to be restored, and that there is only one way of restoring it. I've drunk a whole bottle of vodka and I'm feeling okay, feeling better than I've felt for weeks, in fact.

It's cold outside, and it's getting dark, and there's no one around. Now is the time. I can hear the crashing of the waves far below and it sounds like Joey's voice calling to me. I know it won't hurt because Joey's watching out for me. He'll be there to take my hand, to guide me through. I feel happy now. I know that this will be the best thing I've ever done. It fills me with joy to think that in a minute or two we'll be flying together, my brother and I.

Mark Morris was born in the mining town of Bolsover in 1963, and spent his childhood in Tewkesbury, Hong Kong, Newark and Huddersfield. He now lives near York with his wife, the artist Nel Whatmore, and their two children, David and Polly. He became a full-time writer in 1988 on the Enterprise Allowance Scheme, and is author of the novels *Toady*, *Stitch*, *The Secret of Anatomy*, *The Immaculate*, *Mr Bad Face*, *Longbarrow*, *Genesis*, and of the short story collection *Close to the Bone*. His short fiction, articles and reviews have sold to a variety of anthologies and magazines, including this one: 'Holes' appeared in TTA14 (and he reviewed Stephen King's *Hearts in Atlantis* for TTA21). Mark is currently working on a new novel entitled *Fiddleback*.

THE CINEMA

'I do not believe what writers say about themselves, except when they think they are not saying it about themselves.' So wrote Dennis Potter, stating a view which could form the basis of a whole philosophy of what fiction is about — all fiction, not just his.

Now he's been dead for a few years and those close to him are speaking out, Potter is being reconsidered as a figure, and as with the *Blackeyes* debacle a mythology has sprung up which sidelines the stature of his art in favour of a focusing on his sexual proclivities. Once again he has become known by the unfortunate but somehow apt-sounding soubriquet 'Dirty Den'. It is true that sexual obsession in his life and in his work were woven so completely together that they became effectively one thing, and that is a phenomenon of interest. But it's important that the rest of what Potter means to us isn't forgotten.

Dennis Potter is simply the most important creative figure in television, ever. He is possibly the only artist of first rank to employ television as his prime medium. There is no one to compare with him: he is more than just a playwright, more than just a film maker. He subverted the conventions of television drama and moulded it into something it could never have been without him. He used TV with the freedom and boldness of an experimental painter, and brought to it the gravitas of the major novel.

The style, tone and feel of Potter's work is instantly recognisable. Just as we know what 'Lynchian' means (TTA17) we know what is 'Potteresque': evocations of witchy childhood, nostalgia, intense fantasy and dreamlife, and raw sexuality, all overlaid with a surreal gloss, a poetry of film imagery where sober characters suddenly burst into song-and-dance, and adults and children are interchangeable. From his earliest works Potter has incorporated non-naturalistic devices spontaneously and seamlessly. He has also extensively exploited genre forms in a post-modem pastiche method, using supernatural fantasy, the romance story, the hardboiled detective yarn, futuristic sf, and much more to enlarge his storytelling scope. And he is a dedicated metafictionist, constantly drawing attention to the artificiality of the medium, and putting the process of writing and fictionalizing experience, and of living as a writer at the heart of his subject matter. All this gives him much in common with slipstream: if he ever knew of the word and its meaning I'm sure he would have strongly approved.

Born in the Forest of Dean in 1935, Potter uses its 'green-out' effect and its connotations of the mysterious and the forbidden throughout his work. Like young Philip in *The Singing Detective* he made extended trips to London beginning at the age of ten, and eventually stayed on with relatives, attending a good grammar school and gaining entry to Oxford. In classic psychological textbook fashion he tells of a key traumatic event which 'shaped' him — sexual abuse at the hands of a gay uncle during the first London stay. In *The Singing Detective* the traumatic event is represented as the suicide of Philip's mother, in which he is implicated; but in the early play *Moonlight on the Highway* it is dealt with more directly, and in *Cold Lazarus* it turns up again, as an attack by an old man in the woods — those woods being the Forest of Dean of course.

This is typical of the way Potter salts his work with autobiography. And, in a mirror image of that, he was known to have playfully fabricated when telling real life stories to friends. So in art and life — and in their complex interaction — he was constantly using sleight-of-hand, confabulating in a dance of the seven veils of obfuscation and revelation. In the best of his works this sense of personal mythmaking lies at the heart of their greatness and uniqueness.

I do not believe what writers say...

Potter was nothing if not prolific, and in a long multifaceted career he turned out a body of some fifty TV plays, serials, adaptations and cinema works — as well as several books — all of which cannot be listed and analysed within a short article. When he wasn't producing cutting edge masterpieces like *Pennies from Heaven* and *The Singing Detective* he was dramatizing Hardy and F Scott Fitzgerald, or penning screenplays such as *Gorky Park*, *Track 29* and *Dreamchild*.

He surfaced as a TV dramatist in 1965 with a number of pieces for the Wednesday Play, the best remembered of which are two works based upon his experiences as a social climber and unsuccessful Labour parliamentary candidate: *Stand Up, Nigel Barton* and *Vote, Vote, Vote for Nigel Barton*. These plays were basically realist, but still Potter used devices such as having a character address the camera directly; and in scene out of Nigel's childhood he had the adult actor (Keith Barron) playing the boy — a daring and novel technique which was the seed for the marvellously innovative *Blue Remembered Hills*.



A steady stream of plays followed, several dealing in fantasy themes, such as Where the Buffalo Roam, in which a loner teenager lives out an escapist existence as the gunslinger Shane; and Lay Down Your Arms, where a bored War Office clerk imagines he is a top goalkeeper — both are prototypes for Marlow's fantasy life in *The Singing Detective*. Then there were a number of works with a religious element, such as A Beast With Two Backs, a hoary tale of hypocrisy in the Forest Of Dean, where a preacher colludes in the murder of the village slut in order to protect his nephew; and the controversial Son of Man, which told the Gospel story shorn of miracles with Colin Blakely as a very secular working class Jesus who has doubts about his exalted status.

In all these early works Potter is being iconoclastic in one way or another, in form or content or both. He deliberately set out to shock, but in a constructive ground-breaking kind of way. This was the late 60s/early 70s, a time of great artistic freedom and desire to experiment, and Potter's TV bosses were generally on his side, as were the critics. However in 1976 he went too far with the play Brimstone and Treacle, which was sensationally banned internally at the BBC for its depiction of the devil raping a mentally disabled girl.

This sounds more dangerous — and ideal for tabloid hysteria — than it actually was, for the play is really rather whimsical, with a youthful Michael Kitchen playing the devil as a plausible con-man; and the rape itself is not dealt with explicitly in camera terms. The play's ironic twist is that the rape proves to be 'therapeutic', restoring the girl to sentience and uncovering another's dark secret.

It is, of course, fabulist — a variation on the Sleeping Beauty myth — and the rape no more than a device. It didn't deserve to be banned — an act seen by many as the start of a new reactionary backlash in TV — and is in fact a fascinating study of the interaction of so-called 'good' and 'evil', and indeed how they are dealt with within the conventions of storytelling. The way it parodies piety, religiovirtuous and fascist attitudes is masterful, as is the way it wrenches apart our expectations of plot. To circumvent the ban it was remade as a cinema film in 1982, with Sting in the lead role.

For many years Potter had been using 30s Tin Pan Alley music within his work, seeing it as a profound and meaningful cultural entity which transcended the throwaway nature and trashiness of some of the individual songs themselves. By the later part of the 70s he'd gained some experience of writing TV serials as well individual plays — he'd done the six part Casanova, starting Frank Finlay, and the seven part The Mayor of Casterbridge — and through this work he hit upon the idea to construct a different kind of serial, a more wholly creative one, in the manner of an 'art' play: it would be set in the 30s, and would involve music. What emerged from a long period in development was Pennies from Heaven — a breakthrough work in Potter's career.

In the 1969 play Moonlight on the Highway David Peters escapes from his tawdry surroundings into an exalted fantasy world built around the music of Al Bowlly. There is a key scene in Moonlight where Peters mimes to a Bowlly record on the turntable, and out of this was born Potter's most memorable and magical device having characters mime and act out pre-recorded songs as part of the fabric of the drama — which became the hallmark of *Pennies from Heaven*. It is subtly different to the method of the traditional musical, where performers actually sing appropriate songs, commissioned for them and designed to fall in with the sweep of the piece as a whole; more it is a way of adding another narrative layer which articulates the character's inner life — his or her hopes, dreams and fears. It comments upon the 'singalong' way we use music to enhance our lives, and its fundamental difference to the musical is most apparent when there is a strong disparity between song and 'singer', such as when female vocals issue from a male mouth and vice versa, or in Singing Detective where Al Jolson's 'After You've Gone' is 'sang' by a scarecrow.

Pennies from Heaven follows the story of down-at-heel sheet music salesman Arthur Parker — a role which the then up-and-coming Bob Hoskins made his own. Arthur is a flawed character, a deceiver who leads a chequered sexual life and is eventually hung for murder. The cleverness of Pennies lies in the way Arthur's immersement in old songs comes to define his personality, leading to a life lived out in terms of the altered reality of old song narrative.

When is was shown in 1978 Pennies was a triumph, a huge popular and critical success which elevated Potter to something like superstar status. Its combination of innovation of form with a texture of rosy-hued nostalgic quaintness worked brilliantly, and so it is perhaps hard to see just how daringly ambitious and risky a project it was at its outset. Well into production many of the key players were panic-stricken



with the notion that the technique simply wouldn't work; but it did, genuinely extending the syntax of TV drama, and paving the way for the more elaborate mime routines of *Singing Detective* and *Lipstick on Your Collar* — as well as imitations such as Steve Boccho's *Cop Rock* and certain insurance commercials.

And similarly with Potter's next major work, *Blue Remembered Hills*, there was doubt about the feasibility of his other great non-naturalistic device — using adults to play the parts of children. Set in the Forest of Dean during World War Two, it starts with Willie — played with hilarious aplomb by Colin Welland — running through the fields spluttering aeroplane noises and clowning around. He meets the tougher 'lad' Peter (Michael Elphick) and tearfully loses to him in a fight over an apple. Later the group expands, and in another outburst of aggression they kill a squirrel, but feel guilty afterwards. After more beautifully observed kids' mischief a tragedy ensues where the group's misfit, 'Donald Duck' (Colin Jeavons), is burned to death in a barn fire.

The device succeeds all too well, creating a totally unique mythic space, emphasised by the magical Forest background. Somehow it touches the heart of the mystery of film. Why does it work so well? Why are adults playing children more like children than children themselves? Potter himself said that the device acts like a magnifying glass. By using adult actors who are our 'contemporaries' it dissolves the generational distance between child and adult worlds, bringing us face to face with child reality, almost as though we'd been miniaturised rather than the children enlarged.

Throughout the 80s Potter underwent stints of working for the cinema — much of it Hollywood — and it says a lot about the way writing is subordinated within movie craft that nothing memorable — certainly nothing greatly *Potteresque* — emerged from this. The highlight of the 80s occurred back on old ground, when the BBC summoned the long-absent Potter, needing him to give them something big to rival ITV's recent drama successes. What he came up with — *The Singing Detective* — is most memorable, in fact it is a great masterpiece, far and away the finest work ever written for television. Everything that Potter had written before was preparation for this exquisitely complex, cantilevered, multilayered monument to screen creative possibility.

From *Pennies from Heaven* it took the structure of a six part 'televisual novel' with mimed songs, and into that it placed a whole late twentieth century Proustian saga of traumatised childhood, creative refuge, breakdown, analysis and recovery. For most of his adult life Potter suffered from psoriasis, together with arthritic complications, which made his hands close up and mobility difficult. Psoriasis is extraordinary among diseases in that it has a strong psychosomatic element in its origins, but externally visible manifestations — the cracked and flaking skin. So as a disease it carries an inbuilt metaphorical dimension, and is a gift to a playwright. We witness its waxing and waning on Michael Gambon's tortured face as he, like a medieval plague sufferer, fights his very modern psychic battles. One could almost say that psoriasis is a 'slipstream disease'.

The Singing Detective features psoriasis sufferer and novelist Philip Marlow — consummately played by Gambon as an adult and Lyndon Davies as a child — who finds himself bedridden in hospital due to a particularly acute attack of the illness. In order to keep himself sane, he rewrites one of his detective novels in his head, following the adventures of his hero, the Singing Detective, a Chandleresque gumshoe whose spare-time interest is crooning in a forties band. But the 'plot' of this novel eventually spills out beyond its boundaries and synergises with Marlow's recollections of what went on in his childhood — another detective story — becoming an invaluable tool in his growing awareness of his need for psychotherapy. So the machinations of a personal psychological struggle become played out in screen terms as a postmodern *film noir* melodrama-cum-musical, and one is left to gasp at the delectable cleverness of its unfolding.

Thus the brilliance of *Singing Detective* lies not just in the story but also in the way it is told, in the dazzling non-linear screen language it invents to illuminate the intricate interconnectedness of its themes — all revolving around the central question: *who done it?* Never has a piece made such comprehensive and masterly use of different ontological levels — reality, dream, hallucination, memory, fantasy, fictional composition — to create a kaleidoscopic resonance. And never has a piece so highlighted and deeply explored the phenomenon of the alter ego, this hybrid of the self and superhero who follows one's every step, and if one is a writer inevitably becomes blown up into a full scale character.

The Singing Detective — played, naturally, by Gambon again — is spot on: with his crisp moustache, cigarette pursed at a jaunty angle, hatbrim shadow across his face, looking suave and chiselled in the *noir* lighting, he is just that little bit more

Dennis Potter



handsome, more intelligent and more resourceful than Marlow himself. He uses Marlow's attributes, but in a much more adroit and fluent way than Marlow himself ever could. Most importantly he is powerful in areas where Marlow is powerless; he does the business, sets the world to rights in a fictional realm which draws material from the real one and feeds back sustenance in the form of insight.

But the extra-special magic of Singing Detective is revealed well into the piece when the different layers cross-pollinate and yet another layer - one of pure screen poetry — is born. When Philip as a boy runs through the hospital ward of Marlow's present, and Marlow the adult returns to his Forest of Dean past and sees his father as a contemporary, we are being eloquently told that the cure is working. And when the Singing Detective finally turns up at the hospital with his gun in his hand we know we're in for a metaphorical tour de force of a climax.

And after Singing Detective came Blackeyes. What can one say about Blackeyes? It is a travesty, an almost pathological piece of hubris. The success of Singing Detective enabled Potter to gain much greater power in the production process at the BBC, so with Blackeyes he cast it, directed it, and after having dispensed with longtime collaborator Kenith Trodd, effectively produced it as well. How did he use this auteur status? To create what is at heart a home movie of a sexual fantasy, and to begin a decline into a whole tranche of work which is one way or another marred by his personal sexual agenda.

The story of Blackeyes — a model who is exploited ruthlessly by the advertising industry, and by extension male sexual acquisitiveness — was originally written by Potter as a novel, so when it came to casting he had well formed ideas of what he wanted for the lead role. He chose the tall, sultry, raven haired actress Gina Bellman, and proceded to use her as a fantasy icon — not only within the film itself, but also offscreen, as the target of a real life obsessive fixation. Here Potter is seemingly creating another meta-level in his art where such offscreen intrigue is as much a part of the 'drama' as what is actually filmed. The addition to the film of his own voice-over, commentating on his feelings for Blackeyes/Bellman, confirms this, cementing together the two worlds.

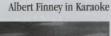
Contentious from the outset, Blackeyes was dragged deeper into the mire by Potter's directorial technique. His reliance on slow-moving track and dolly shots, which rapidly become monotonous, shows more than anything that he lacked the patience to cover a scene properly from a variety of angles, and his commitment to other disciplines of direction appears less than fulsome. But then as the solipsistic creator of a fantasy why bother? Fantasies don't cut from wide shot to close up and back again, they move sinuously from the outside to the inside and then deeper and deeper in — just like Potter's camera, and the myopia of that camera is one reason why Blackeyes fails: it indulges in the exact same visual lust it is meant to be condemning. But perhaps this is unfair, as none of us can see Blackeyes in the way its creator did, since it is a 3D movie for which only he possessed the right set of spectacles.

Inevitably public and critical reaction to Blackeyes was terrible. Potter was pilloried in tabloids and broadsheets alike for the sleazy, voyeuristic nature of the piece, and the nickname 'Dirty Den' was bom. It was a shocking reversal from the approbation he received following Singing Detective, and he took it badly; but he picked up the pieces. Presently another serial in the Pennies mould followed — Lipstick on Your Collar, for Channel 4, featuring mimed songs from the rock'n'roll era of Potter's youth, and drawing on his National Service experiences. Like Blackeyes it works around the theme of bimbo-as-icon, but in contrast to the brunette Bellman it features the curvaceous blonde Louise Germaine, whom Potter discovered and personally groomed. But, typically, the characterizations are similar in that they are both retro-soft porn fantasy figures with little depth of personality.

Lipstick explores the obsessive fixations of two men for cinema usherette Sylvia (Germaine). They are the young, shy, inexperienced Private Francis Francis, and the creepy, middle-aged lecherous Harold Atterbow — delightfully played by Roy Hudd. They seem to represent Potter at different stages in his life, and suggest a continuity of failure and desperation. Though well produced and colourful, Lipstick has a flat, journeyman feel in some parts, and is not in same league as Pennies or Singing Detective.

Keeping faith with his favoured actresses — the yin and yang of his desire, perhaps — Potter used Gina Bellman again in Secret Friends, a feature film about a couple involved in bizarre fantasy games; and Louise Germaine again in the daft sex romp Midnight Movie, where she goes crazy with a cleaver in black knickers and very little else!

So finally we come to Potter's death from cancer in 1994, which, as it was fore-







castable, enabled him to stage-manage his last days with great panache and singular courage. His final interview with Melvyn Bragg, where he alternated sips of champagne with liquid morphine, was as memorable as the best of his dramatic works. And then there was the valiant push to finish his last two pieces — both four part serials — *Karaoke* and *Cold Lazarus*, which were produced posthumously in a unique collaboration between the BBC and Channel 4.

Karaoke has an air of warmed-up leftovers from earlier more vigorous works mixed in with Potter's later sadness. There are Singing Detective-like flashes of intrigue in the fictional layering — this time there is a film-within-a-film element — and the idea of an author hearing outside agencies speaking his lines is reminiscent of the mid-70's play Double Dare. But these promising beginnings are not developed to their fullest, and we are left with more layers of reflectiveness — Potter the dying writer looking at himself. It is evident that both Karaoke and Cold Lazarus needed rewrites, and would have been much improved had Potter lived to do this. Nonetheless the autobiographical side to Karaoke fascinates: through Albert Finney's Daniel Feeld, Potter is tying up his 'real' loose ends in fictional form. Feeld's fixation with Sandra, a nightclub hostess — 'Linda' in the film-within-a-film — and his determination to do right by her before he dies, is based jointly on Potter's unconsummated fling with Gina Bellman, and his Henry Higgins/ Eliza Dolittle relationship with Louise Germaine.

The karaoke phenomenon is an ideal Potter subject — an example of life catching up with his art: a medium through which we can all become singing detectives. And a moment of vintage Potter magic is created at the end of *Karaoke* when the dying Feeld sings 'Pennies From Heaven' on a karaoke machine before shooting the wicked club owner Pig Mallion. But death is not the end for Daniel Feeld; in *Cold Lazarus* his cryogenically frozen head is reanimated 374 years later — into a living nightmare where the rights to his memories have been acquired by a Rupert Murdoch-like tycoon who intends to transmit them over his networks and sweep the ratings.

As screen sci-fi *Lazarus* has a somewhat dated feel — like early episodes of *Dr Who* scripted by Aldous Huxley or Woody Allen's *Sleeper* without the jokes. There is a sense of Potter as a nascent sci-fi writer toying with the genre's conventions to see what happens, but still there is real power in the depiction of Feeld's plight, and an uneasy verisimilitude in Potter's speculative vision of the future of entertainment.

Considering Potter's condition when he wrote it, *Lazarus* is a remarkable testament to his tenacity as a writer and his willingness to explore new forms. Feeld's final escape from the prison of his reanimated head, and his voyage away up the tunnel of light, seeing angels, is a wonderful image with which to end a career without parallel. Dennis Potter came out of a golden age of British television, a time when it was a younger, exiting, genuinely innovative and self-expressive medium, before it was artistically neutered by the commercial imperative. If Potter was starting out today he would probably be writing episodes of *Casualty* rather than anything more individualistic, since the arty stand-alone play or film equivalent, the medium which nurtured him — along with Alan Clarke, Ken Loach and Mike Leigh, to name but three others — is all but extinct.

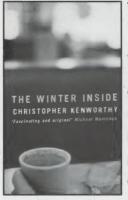
We badly need Dennis Potter, and we need the new up-and-coming Dennis Potters; but with TV the way it is now where are they going to come from?

FILMOGRAPHY TV & CINEMA WORKS Stand Up, Nigel Barton Vote, Vote, Vote for Nigel Barton Where the Buffalo Roam 1966 A Beast With Two Backs 1968 1969 Moonlight on the Highway Son of Man Lay Down Your Arms 1971 Traitor Casanova (six parts) 1974 Schmoedipus 1976 **Double Dare Brimstone and Treacle** The Mayor of Casterbridge (seven parts) Pennies From Heaven (six parts) 1979 **Blue Remembered Hills** 1980 Cream in My Coffee 1982 **Brimstone and Treacle** (cinema) 1983 Gorky Park (cinema) 1985 Tender is the Night (six parts) Dreamchild (cinema) 1986 The Singing Detective (six parts) 1987 Track 29 (cinema) 1989 Blackeyes (four parts) 1991 Secret Friends (cinema) Lipstick On Your Collar (six parts) 1994 Midnight Movie 1996 Karaoke (four parts) Cold Lazarus (four parts) BOOKS BY POTTER Hide and Seek (novel) 1986 Ticket to Ride (novel) 1987 Blackeyes (novel) Seeing the Blossom 1994 (interviews/lecture) **BOOKS ABOUT POTTER Dennis Potter: A Life on Screen** by John Cook Fight & Kick & Bite by W Stephen Gilbert **Dennis Potter:** The Authorized Biography by Humphrey Carpenter* *source of background material for this article



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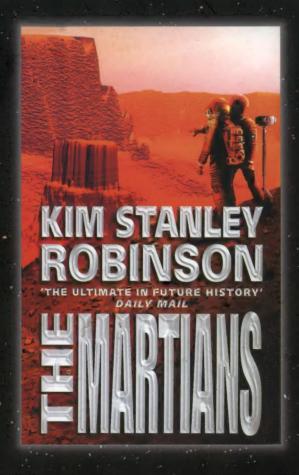
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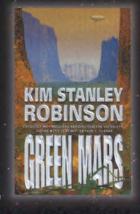


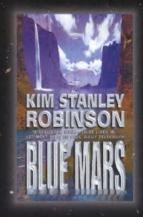
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'Indian Hills, Colorado – January 5, 2000. During its brilliantly successful Christmas mission to refurbish and repair the Hubble Space Telescope, the Space Shuttle Discovery carried a Martian flag into orbit for the first time. The red, green and blue colors derive from stages of Mars' transformation from barrenness to life depicted in the epic Red Mars, Green Mars, Blue Mars trilogy written by Kim Stanley Robinson. It is fitting that this action occurred when it did; at the dawning of a new millennium, for surely the largest event of the next era will be the birth of the first of humanity's new nations in space.'

DR ROBERT ZUBRIN, THE MARS SOCIETY







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